

Domestic Affairs

by Nevar88

Category: Halo

Genre: Humor

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2006-12-05 07:46:14

Updated: 2009-02-01 09:52:46

Packaged: 2016-04-27 00:41:33

Rating: T

Chapters: 17

Words: 78,330

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A selection of short stories featuring the Master Chief and the Arbiter attempting to comprehend the universe. Well, bits of it anyway. Not a slash. Remember to R&R on your way out.

1. Fanfiction

****Domestic Affairs****

A/N: Thank you for clicking on "Domestic Affairs" my first attempt at Halo fiction. This is hopefully going to become a selection of Halo-related short stories; set in a time after the Human/Covenant war has ended. It's main characters; the Arbiter and the Master Chief attempt to tackle a world where their combat-talents are obsolete. This isn't a slash, the Chief and the Arbiter are merely friendsâ€¦ well, associatesâ€¦ or maybe just people that can stand to share the same planet with one another. I hope I've managed to keep them somewhat in character. Please remember to R&R because I'd appreciate constructive criticism.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

****1. Fanfiction****

The Arbiter pursed his mandibles thoughtfully and peered at the screen in front of him.

Shifting uncomfortably in the human-seat he was perched (by only a small margin) on, he twisted his head around on his lengthy neck and bellowed, "Demon! Come here, if you would."

"What is it?" Spartan 117, the Master Chief, entered the computer suite with an SMG slung careless over his shoulder.

"Ever heard of Fanfiction?" The Arbiter swung back to face the screen. "There is quite a large amount of it on your web of

communications."

"Internet," the Chief sighed, setting his SMG down on a nearby table and sinking into a chair, which gave an ominous creak. "It's called the Internet. And yes, I've heard that some of the younger marines have an interest in Fanfiction. What about it?"

"You haven't perused it yourself?" The Arbiter's mandibles quirked at the corners.

"Not so much."

"You really should, it's quite fascinating." Enthused the Arbiter.

"It's the product of people with too much time on their hands and far too many ideals about pointless subjects." The Master Chief surreptitiously peered over the Arbiter's shoulder.

"Really?" The Arbiter continued, oblivious, "I believe that the craft of finely honing literature is an art form in itself." The Arbiter turned slowly, and the Chief quickly tried to look disinterested. "Do you think people will ever craft fiction about us someday Demon?"

"What?"

The Arbiter sighed, "you know, the Covenant, humanity, the battles you've fought, the foes I've vanquished. Such things may pass into the hands of fiction writers everywhere, possibly even forging new legacies for us."

"New legacies?" The Chief sounded dubious. "Like what?"

"Wellâ€¦" The Arbiter sought for a subject, "possibly battles that haven't happened, but we could have easily participated in. Maybe they could enforce certain pairings between us and OC's." He noticed the Chief's look (in spite of the fact he still had his helmet on). "That is; Original Characters created by the writer. I've learnt some of the lingo."

"I don't think I could feature in a romance." Snorted the Chief. "If you didn't know, Spartans are asexual."

"All the more reason why a romance must exist only in fiction." The Arbiter smirked. "How about you and Cortana then? A suitable match I'd assume?"

"What?" The Chief's normally emotionless voice held a faint trace of trepidation. "That's impossible."

"And why would that be?" A flickering in one of the holographic terminals in the corner of the room eventually formed into the shapely violet avatar of Cortana. Her arms were crossed and expression of annoyance flickered across her features.

"How long have you been listening?" The Master Chief growled.

"Long enough." Cortana's frown gave way to a playful smirk, one that easily matched the Arbiter's. "So, what's wrong with me? Am I

unattractive?"

"I never said that." The Chief grunted. "To the regular soldier your avatar isâ€¦ nice in appearance. But I'm not at all interested in how you look. Also, you're a hologram."

"Exactly." Said the Arbiter expansively. "A relationship without touching. Purely romantic inâ€¦ well maybe not romantic, possibly a relationshipâ€¦ hmmm, what do you call a relationship that neither party can love, touch or fantasize about?"

"A professional one." Said the Chief. "Butâ€¦ what about you?" He asked, sounding as if he was only vaguely interested. "Anyone you could be paired with?"

"I highly doubt it."

"Oh?" Said the Chief airily. "How about that Commander Half-Jaw? You two seem pretty close."

"What?" The Arbiter yelped. "That's preposterous! He is a male of my species!"

"Are you?" Asked Cortana.

"Indeed I am." The Arbiter growled. "The very idea of a female in the armada is absolâ€¦" He suddenly noticed Cortana's scowl. "â€¦lutely genius suggestion. I shall have to speak with the High Commander about it. Don't know why we never thought of that before."

"To be honest, how do you know which of you are female?" Asked the Master Chief.

"You jest, correct?" Said the Arbiter incredulously. "Is it not obvious? No? Really? Very well, I suppose to the untrained eye the most notable feature of the female Sangheili is the vivid plume that sprouts from her brow. Did you not know this?"

"No." Admitted the Chief and Cortana simultaneously.

"Possibly we'd better let this subject drop." Offered the Arbiter.

"Yes, before someone suggests you two should pair off." Said Cortana jokingly.

The Arbiter and Master Chief turned and stared at her.

An awkward silence followed as the two turned and faced one another.

Then burst out laughing.

It wasn't so much laughter, more as a cacophony that attempted to sound like laughter.

The Chief's laugh was more of a snicker, and Cortana doubted that he'd ever laughed out loud in his life, while the Arbiter's laugh was hushed but accompanied by the sound of his mandibles colliding and providing a sinister clicking noise.

When the two had finally subsided, Cortana smirked, "so, are the two fiction 'experts' going to suggest anything else this evening?"

"How about a fiction that isn't about war." The Arbiter's voice took on a wistful tone. "A place where all races across the galaxy live in relative peace and plenty and there is no turmoil. A place where even the Flood can be welcomed as brothers." He noticed the Master Chief and Cortana staring at him.

"Iâ€¦ don't think anyone would read that." Said Cortana carefully. "Strife and conflict keep people interested."

"And I've witnessed the Flood first hand, and no one would welcome them in any form of fiction, no matter how farfetched." Added the Chief.

"I suppose." The Arbiter admitted sadly. He shut down the computer he'd been working from. "Still, I believe your fiction has certainly taught me something of human nature."

"Like a willingness to persevere when there are people who show an interest in what you do?" Offered Cortana.

"That people fantasize about situations they can never be a part of?" Added the Chief.

"No, more that, if you give them a means, humans will write about anything." The Arbiter smirked.

"Now that's hardly fair," protested Cortana as the Chief and Arbiter made their way towards the door, "I've read through the database and there are some very well written works."

The Chief turned, standing on the door's threshold. "How long did it take you to read the entire database?"

"A few seconds." Cortana shrugged. "Why?"

"No reason." The Chief tapped in the access code and the automatic door hissed closed after him.

"You know demon." The Arbiter mused. "What if we wrote some fiction of our own?"

"Why would we do that?" The Chief asked dubiously.

"Well, with the war ended, there is little left for us to do. Therefore we have the time." Said the Arbiter matter-of-factly. Then he grinned. "And if there is fiction written about us I'd like to make sure it was done right."

2. Dramatis Persona

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

****Dramatis Persona****

This is a Revised Version of my original OC list, a grouping of characters now serving as permanent fixtures in 'Domestic Affairs.' Characters not featured are just general attempts to enhance certain jokes and themes and bear no actual relevancy to the text. The following all either appear throughout the fiction or are set to appear in further chapters at a later date. Also provided is a small background and character description for anyone who wants to know.

****Humans****

Master Sergeant Marie Belle " A six-foot tall female soldier from Paris. Former ODS, she disappeared from the records following shortly after her hushed dismissal. Her reappearance was heralded by immediate entrance to marines, and advancement in rank throughout the human-Covenant war.

The Giggly Girl from Maintenance " A nameless nuisance from maintenance, generally latches on to the Master Chief, and acts as a catalyst for numerous events. Is something of a prodigy, though this isn't always obvious. Created and patented numerous designs, most of which are impressive yet useless, the girl is truly adept at her craft. This may be the one thing that keeps her aboard, however.

Private Chester O'Riley " A low-ranked UNSC Private. Among those captured on High Charity after a failed assault on a minor Prophet. Released by the Master Chief and subsequently almost died from exposure to Flood as a result. Eventual escape at the paws of a Grunt pilot left an acute fear of flying.

Daniel Paxton " 'Prime Minister' of Earth. Intelligent, though with minimal actual political powers, Paxton serves as the figurehead of civilian Earth. Among several claims, Paxton was a notable aid in the evacuation of New Mombassa, and has subsequently devoted himself to healing the memory of the war.

****Sangheili****

Taso 'Ratanalee " An Elite Zealot with a glass eye. Commands the _Veiled Shade_, a prized Sangheili stealth craft of considerable esteem. A skilled warrior, 'Ratanalee achieved command at a young age, and was only too happy to lend his services to the civil effort against the Jiralhanae.

Tusa 'Falana " Taso 'Ratanalee's younger sister. Has a mass of 'scalped' skin around her head and neck. Smart and of noble birth, Tusa holds sway on many of the Covenant's political circles as a connoisseur of the arts and talented linguist.

Eva 'Embrax " A tall, stick-thin female Sangheili cook. Apprentice to one of the most renowned Sangheili chefs of all time, Eva has quite a reputation to live up to, and has often felt to strain in doing so. Eva's temperament is unpredictable and she tends to develop malicious feeling towards those in power, political or otherwise.

Fuka 'Hyoronmee " A High-ranked Councilor within the new Covenant of the Ministry of Concert. Ranked among the least popular Councilors of all time, Fuka 'Hyoronmee is a social outcast. From a loveless

marriage to minimal friends, 'Hyoronmee is highly devoted to his work and as such is a talented diplomat and political mind, if slightly stilted. Boasts the largest collection of Brute weaponry in the system.

Grae 'Negrulee â€" An Elite Major that serves on the _Veiled Shade_ and as 'Ratanalee's personal assistant. Formerly a slow-developing youth and friend to Eva 'Embrax, 'Negrulee was late to join the war effort due to his small stature and still-prominent tail. Once fully grown, 'Negrulee is still not among the best of Sangheili soldiery and has carved out a niche by the side of the Zealot 'Ratanalee to compensate.

Esi 'Rofum â€" Daughter of the Heretic, Sesa 'Refumee turned poverty-ridden, lower class Sangheili. Now works in Eva's kitchen and has slight affection for the Arbiter. Always held that her father, the late Sesa 'Refumee, would never speak falsely, Esi was shunned for her, then heretical beliefs and turfed from high society by her former peers. She still holds the hope that one day her father will be recognized for his true service to the Covenant.

Heda 'Felsolee â€" Overzealous, elderly Elite Councilor. Total bastard would be the phrase best used for the coward known as Heda 'Felsolee. A puppet of the Prophet of Truth, 'Felsolee's life took a rough turn at the San 'Shyuum's death, and his bitterness towards humankind, the Sangheili and most of all the Arbiter knows no bounds. Is a strong believer that humanity is the offal the Forerunners cast aside when departing this plain, and is content to act as such.

****Unggoy****

Spegg â€" A High-ranking Grunt Ultra. Highly opinionated and devout to the core, Spegg is often considered bright by Unggoy standards, and a lackwit by any other. Holds the respect of a Deacon for his views, and campaigned fiercely, if erratically, against the Brutes.

Knoitt â€" Special Forces Unggoy. Delirious and of questionable sanity, Knoitt was bounced from platoon to platoon before ending up under the command of Rtas 'Vadumee as a heavy weapons specialist. Loves all manner of explosives, and often has to be reminded to let go of the grenade after activation. From a distance, preferably.

Spequo â€" Excitable Grunt pilot. Flies in a haphazard manner. Is better known for his landings, all of which are renowned for their consistency to be very sudden, jarring and escorted by rolling waves of fire.

Nami â€" A Grunt cook, assists Eva occasionally. Distant cousin to Knoitt, Nami is stable and simple-minded, though not entirely stupid. Is generally swathed in white fabric, so much so that she tends to remind the average passer-by of a small, indignant snowdrift.

****Jiralhanae****

Sphinx â€" A diplomatically talented Brute with golden fur along her back, marking her out as a form of wise-woman. Loud and fierce, with

a respectable left hook, Sphinx is the desire of any male Jiralhanae, not least for her utter devotion the Brute lifestyle and sheer love for the Forerunners and the teachings of Auur.

****San 'Shyuum****

The Prophet of Wonder â€" One of the few Prophets to decline a Brute bodyguard. Still dislikes humans though. The Prophet of Wonder is veritably powerless, only remaining as a religious figurehead. The once High Prophet of Equivocal Divinity, Wonder lost his position to one San 'Shyuum and also the Prophetess, the Questing Solon to another. Humankind is just another tragedy in his already overstuffed books.

The Questing Solon â€" High Deaconess and the Hierarch of Equivocal Divinity. Half-Cousin of the Prophet of Wonder, the Questing Solon was drawn away from him by the advances of another, younger Prophet. In an attempt to make amends, she took control of Equivocal Divinity during the civil war and managed to rally the populace together as one against the storm.

****Structures****

The Veiled Shade â€" Sangheili stealth vessel commanded by Taso 'Ratanalee.

The Amazon â€" Human MAC gun station, containing a forest environment for Marines preferring a more natural atmosphere to the Cairo mall.

Equivocal Divinity â€" Lesser Covenant Holy city controlled by the Questing Solon.

Jell0 â€" Elevator AI and general whiner.

Silver Penny â€" Ship autopilot.

Guard Robots â€" Slow-witted machines referred to scathingly as 'cavemen' by AI's due to their massive, stooped frames and imbecilic combat tactics.

****Terminology****

Yanta â€" A type of large yellow fruit, native to Sangheilios.

Mildworm â€" Long grey grub that favors the Yanta fruit.

Scalping â€" During the period where a Sangheili sheds its skin, the old flesh can be rolled up and treated with a type of organic glue to fuse it to the new skin, often on the head, neck or arms. Something of a fashion statement.

Jiralhuun â€" Sangheili swearword meaning 'son of a Brute.'

Rukan â€" Covenant variant for Human.

Sunjin â€" One of the worst Sangheili insults, literally meaning 'nameless.' Also the name of a type of Sangheili 'bogeyman.'

Rikkak â€" The less said about this, the better.

Shit-Cup â€" Swearword coined by the Master Chief and adopted by all and sundry.

Auur â€" Brute Deity.

Aureauk â€" Brute spiritual leader, marked out by golden fur.

Galagan â€" Large, Sangheilian fowl.

Gurruck â€" Called Brute-clay by optimists. And shit to everyone else.

3. Target Practice

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

2. Target Practice

Sergeant Avery Johnson, hero of the Halo wars and destroyer of more Covenant bastards than you could shake a Grunt at, raised his pistol and peered through the scope at his current target.

With practiced ease he loosed three shots in quick succession, scoring a bullet through the head, heart and gut on his adversary.

He stepped back smirking triumphantly and eyeing the three holes in the paper cutout at the other end of the target range. "See that Chief? That's real quality shooting there, without any of your fancy bio-upgrades."

The Master Chief was standing to attention twenty feet away, still as a statue.

He wordlessly strode forwards and held out a hand for the gun.

Johnson handed it over, cocking an eyebrow at the exchange.

With an almost careless motion the Chief swung the pistol out and fired three shots.

Aside from the paper quivering with the force of the volley there was no proof that the Chief had even hit it.

He'd successfully shot straight through each one of Johnson's bullet holes.

Johnson glared at the seven-foot-tall Spartan. "Lucky shot."

"Shots." The Chief said in a carefully measured monotone as he set the safety on the pistol and handed it back.

Johnson was about to retort when a snicker made him look

round.

Leaning on the wall behind the two soldiers, with his arms folded over his chest, was the Arbiter.

"Where'd you come from squid-face?" Barked Johnson.

"Just walked in a few minutes ago." The Arbiter tapped his armor with one claw. "Active camouflage is excellent for moving unseen." He turned and looked at the paper target Johnson and the Chief had been shooting at, noting that it was in the rough shape of a Sangheili. "What are you doing?"

"Target practice." Grunted Johnson. "It's the only action we have around here nowadays. Do you want a go?"

"Please." The Arbiter stepped forward. "I'll show you how to rip apart a piece of paper." He pulled out his plasma energy sword, the blade lighting up with a hiss, then gave a battle cry and charged.

"Nice technique." Johnson acknowledged as little bits of tattered paper fluttered around the Arbiter's head. "But there's a reason why we call this a _shooting_ range."

"Personally I don't think much of it." The Arbiter deactivated his sword. "In the Covenant we use holograms."

"Yeah, we got some of that too." Said Johnson airily. "But I prefer the old school methods myself. Now get off the range before someone mistakes you for a target!"

"Someone like you?" The Arbiter smirked.

"Don't tempt me Ass-biter." Johnson growled.

"And observe the man known as Johnson, he who may turn the humble insult into pure poetry." The Arbiter proclaimed, striding forwards. "Listen to him turn every aspect of your person into a carefully formed slur from his vast repertoire." He bowed mockingly to Johnson. "Sir I am not worthy of your presence."

"Shut it squid-face." Johnson scowled.

"Have you not already said that?" The Arbiter cocked his head on one side.

"Watch yourself you black-eyed, four-jawed, scaly-assed bastard. I haven't shot anything living in a long time, don't let yourself be the first."

The Arbiter nodded sagely. "You have set a new precedence, well done."

The Master Chief, attempting to intervene, said, "when you two are finished squabbling you could attempt to resolve your differences over a small contest."

"I don't much like sparring with humans." The Arbiter sighed. "They don't pose enough of a challenge."

"What did you have in mind Chief?" Barked Johnson.

"Just a small test of accuracy," said the Spartan. "Each with a sniper rifle. No scopes."

"I don't much like using human weaponry." Said the Arbiter.

"Too bad, because I believe that Johnson should use a beam rifle while you can wield a standard human one."

"Where are we going to get a beam rifle?" Snapped the Arbiter. "My fellow Covenant are hardly likely to just hand one over."

The Master Chief tapped a panel in one of the walls with a fist, and a compartment hissed open.

Inside was a hoard of alien weaponry.

The Arbiter glared at the Chief. "I'm going to let that one slide. For now." He accepted a sniper rifle while Johnson fished a beam rifle out of the pile of Covenant weapons.

Johnson cracked a smile. "How about we make this interesting? If I win then you have to wear a UNSC uniform for a week."

"And if I win then you have to prepare a meal for the Lekgolo." The Arbiter smirked. "That includes cleaning up afterwards."

"Hold on, Lekgolo? That's the big bastards right?"

"The Hunters, yes."

"You want me to make then dinner? That's the best punishment you can come up with?"

The Arbiter's smirk only intensified. "You've never watched Lekgolo eat before have you? It's quite an experience. Also, you don't want to know what they do to shoddy cooks."

"Rightâ€¦" Johnson glanced down at the beam rifle. "Well I've got this contest in the bag anyhow, so I hope you enjoy your new uniform."

"Right." The Master Chief activated a laser pointer on his helmet. "You're going to fire at the same target, I'll point to the target area, you fire when I say. The first person to hit the target wins the shot. I've set a machine to measure that. If you miss, then it goes to your opponent so remember to aim." The Chief led the way over to a fresh target. "Arm your weapons."

Smirking, Johnson watched as the Arbiter loaded the sniper rifle. "Pity that thing doesn't run on a battery, huh?"

"Yes." Grunted the Arbiter. "Still, what can you expect from a _human_ weapon anyway?"

"At least its got a longer life expectancy than your Covenant crap!" Snapped Johnson. "As soon as the battery's ran out it's a piece of junk."

"Enough!" Barked the Chief. "On my mark." He pointed the laser at a spot between the paper Elite's eyes. "Fire!"

Both shot's whizzed through the cutout's 'skull,' Johnson's was the faster so he won the first round.

"Hey Arbiter, have you fired yet?" Johnson snickered.

"Ready?" Snapped the Chief, pointing the laser at the rough area of the paper Elite's heart.

Both shots were loosed and Johnson scored another point as the Arbiter fired too prematurely and hit just off the mark.

"Hey bastard, next time try to aim."

The Chief swung the pointer down to the cutout's groin.

The Arbiter won the point as Johnson hesitated.

"You did that on purpose." Johnson glared accusingly at the Chief.

The Master Chief, as emotionless as ever merely said, "two shots left, best three out of five wins." He concentrated the laser on one of the cutout's fingers.

The Arbiter finally managed to fire faster, scoring another point for himself.

"Right, next point wins." Said the Chief.

Johnson glanced at the Arbiter. "No hard feelings when I completely obliterate you?"

"None, of course." Said the Arbiter graciously. "As I understand it obliterate obviously means 'lose completely and utterly to' in your language."

"Shut up bastard."

"Earth ape."

"Scaly."

"Single jaw."

"Enough!" Roared the Chief. "Ready on my mark!" He pointed to the dead center of the cutout. "FIRE!"

The two rifles swung around and fired.

A hole appeared in the torso of the cutout and a tiny shape suddenly came flying from the end of the shooting range towards the three soldiers.

The Master Chief's hand shot out with unnatural speed and clamped down on the object as it hissed through the air.

The Chief slowly uncurled his fingers and peered at the thing.
"Impossible."

"What is it?" Inquired the Arbiter.

"And who won?" Added Johnson.

"See for yourself." The Chief tossed over the object.

Johnson caught it, then winced and hurled it into the air. "Ow, that's hot!" He passed it from hand-to-hand until it cooled and he was able to take a look at it. "Chiefâ€¦ is thisâ€¦?"

"Yes." The Master Chief nodded.

"What is it?" Asked the Arbiter again, peering over Johnson's shoulder.

Johnson held it up.

It was a sniper shell, with a perfect hole shot straight through it.

"Soâ€¦ that meansâ€¦?" The Arbiter began.

"It's a tie." Concluded Johnson. "As impossible as it may seem we appear to have both won. Or lost. Look's like our bet's are void then."

"Oh no." The Master Chief shook his head slowly. "I'm not letting you two off that easilyâ€¦"

"Uhâ€¦ Arbiter?" Half-Jaw, Commander of the Special Ops. forces glanced at the holy warrior of the Prophets. "What are youâ€¦?"

"Shut up." Growled the Arbiter. "Justâ€¦ Shut up."

He was wearing an ill-fitting UNSC uniform.

Though it was one of the biggest available it was still just about burst at the seams when worn over the Sangheili's heavily muscled form.

"It looks good on you." Half-Jaw tried to be supportive. "It covers the Mark of Shame better then your armor anywayâ€¦"

"I said shut up." The Arbiter grunted. "I don't know how humans can wear something so restrictive. I have terrible pain in my _Ccengrix_."

"I think I have an ointment for thatâ€¦" Half-Jaw struggled not to laugh.

The Arbiter shot him a dirty look then continued. "Still, I do look forward to seeing Johnson's penalty."

But that's another storyâ€|

4. Mall

Hi, sorry I haven't updated in a while. I was intending to put a Cortana and Guilty Spark based chapter here, but I've been completely unable to come up with any good ideas, so if anyone wants to suggest an appropriate storyline then it would be a help.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

****3. Mall****

"This is Spartan 117, can anybody read me?"

"Master Chief," Johnson's voice rang out over the Spartan's headset. "I read you, what's up?"

"I'm in way over my head," growled the Chief, "requesting extraction."

"No can do Chief," the Master Chief could almost _hear_ Johnson's smirk, "you're gonna have to grit your teeth and deal with it."

"Johnson," the Chief continued with the same level growl, "if you don't get me out of this I'llâ€|"

"Sorryâ€| kshâ€| Chiefâ€| can'tâ€| kshâ€| hear you."

"Johnsonâ€|"

"Kshâ€| breaking upâ€| kshâ€| can'tâ€| kshâ€| keep upâ€| communicationsâ€| kshâ€| Covenant attacking!"

"Johnson, I know you're making those noises." Sighed the Master Chief. "And we're at peace with the Covenant."

"Goingsâ€| kshâ€| through aâ€| kshâ€| tunnel." Johnson cut the communication.

"Jackass." The Chief scowled.

"John!" The Chief grimaced as Miranda Keyes hurried over to him, "I hope you're through running off. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

The Chief, from his seat on a bench in the Cairo's indoor mall, looked up at his Commander/antagonist.

Miranda was flanked by two other figures, a soldier the Chief knew, called Sergeant Belle and a girl from maintenance that he wasn't familiar with.

The Chief sighed and stood up.

The mallâ€| that was a bad idea if there ever was one. But it was decided unanimously as the Cairo was being built that soldiers would need a place to relax and spend money.

Admittedly most things the mall stocked were highly overpriced, but the soldiers received a substantial paycheck and had little else to spend it on.

With the Covenant wars drawn to a close, the mall was used now, more then ever.

Miranda was staring at the Chief with her hands on her hips and a distasteful expression adorning her features. "Listen John, I understand that you don't want to part with your MJOLNIR armor, and I'm not asking you to give it up, in fact I even condone your wearing it while on duty. I just think we should get you a selection of other clothing so that you lookâ€| human, for once. At least off duty."

"I'm never off duty." The Chief played his trump card.

Miranda raised an eyebrow, "Johnâ€| Master Chief, you are a decorated war hero of unsurpassed skills, but currently the only wars being fought are the ones in the boardrooms. I'll admit there may come a time when we call upon you to help deal with the last survivors of Truth's armada, but until then, your position can be considered redundant."

"So you are coming with us now." Said Belle. "I wish to get this over with."

The Master Chief, officially John for the day, cast a scowl in Belle's direction. Admittedly, he was glad to have the six-foot tall Paris-born woman accompanying him on this shopping trip. She probably wouldn't suggest anythingâ€| inappropriate. The giggly little maintenance girl on the other handâ€|

"Right, let's do this." Miranda spun around and led the way towards one of the clothes shops.

"Do not worry Chief." Belle smiled. "Remember, this is a military shopping center. There's bound to be at least one outfit to suit you." She looked him up and down. "If any come in you size, that is."

"So John, what do you think?" Miranda flourished an olive green, button-down shirt in his direction. "It's your color."

"I don't think so." John, still in his MJOLNIR armor, sighed. "Listen Commander, I appreciate what you're attempting to do, but I really don't like anything you've offered so far."

Miranda scowled. "Only because you haven't tried anything on. At least take your helmet off."

"Not going to happen." John raised one hand to his helmet protectively.

"Listen John, you're not making this any easier." Miranda sounded exasperated. "Now try on the shirt."

John backed away, casting an imploring look at Belle, only to realize too late that the very helmet he coveted prevented her from noticing his look.

He turned to the maintenance girl, but she was busy searching through the racks of clothing and John could see there'd be no assistance coming from her.

"Ah, Demon, I am elated to have found you."

John turned, and saw, to his bafflement and relief, the Arbiter coming towards him.

The Sangheili warrior raised a hand in greeting as he approached.

"I'd better see what he wants." Said John to a glowering Miranda. He strode over to the Arbiter. "Arbiter. What are you doing here?"

The Elite's mandibles twitched. "I'm here on an excursion, if you will. Since the wars ended many of the Covenant have wanted to experience human culture, the Unggoy in particular. I'm in fact here with one such assemblage, mostly to ensure they don't get themselves brutally maimed."

"Don't you have your own culture?" John carefully steered the Arbiter away from his seething female companions.

"Once." Sighed the Arbiter. "Before the Prophets took control."

"Ah," John nodded sagely. "You look like you need a drink."

"I'm sorry to refuse your courtesy but, as the Arbiter, I am not at liberty to consume intoxicants."

"Not what I meant." John sighed. "How about a coffee?"

"A what?"

John ushered the Sangheili towards a table in the main dining complex. "You'll see."

The Arbiter watched John stride off, marines and Unggoy alike scurrying out of his way.

He sighed and tried to arrange himself in the human-sized seat so that he at least wouldn't overflow over the pathetic plastic device.

"This is the most uncomfortable I've ever been." The Sangheili warrior grunted. "Human's really need to invest in some larger seating apparatus."

He bowed his head in acknowledgement as a couple of Sangheili Councilors strode past on their way to a meeting with Lord Hood.

Either they failed to notice him, or the armor of the Arbiter terrified them as much as every other Covenant warrior he tended to bump into.

"Hey split lip." A group of marines sauntered past. "Waiting for your girlfriend?"

Their snigger was abruptly cut off as the Master Chief suddenly brushed past them.

He set a steaming polystyrene cup in front of the Arbiter. "Marines giving you problems Arbiter?"

"Hardly." The Arbiter chuckled, sniffing the coffee thoughtfully. "I'm actually enjoying the human manner of disrespectful banter. It makes a change from the upright reverence the Covenant always offer. Whenever I attempt to speak to my kin I only receive worried looks, as if I were a Prophet or some such." He attempted to fit his mandibles around the mouth of the cup. "This is highly ill-suited to my requirements." He muttered. "Sangheili cups are much wider."

"Sorry to hear that." John unclasped his helmet for the sake of his own coffee. "The treatment of your people towards you, I mean."

"It's notâ€¦ bad." Said the Arbiter carefully. "It's just hard to retain an old friend when they see you as an invincible holy warrioaaaaaaaargh! Demon!"

"What?" John set his helmet on the table with a decisive click.

"You really do look like a demon!" The Arbiter's mandibles hung agape. "As pale as the ancient dervishes of Sangheili lore! Like a ghost."

"Thanks." John growled. "This is why I hate the idea of dressing in civilian wear. My armor is who I am."

"Such as it has become with I." The Arbiter finally worked out how to work a cup. "Hmmm, thisâ€¦ cor-fee is intriguing. Not as sweet as Sangheili beverages."

John gave a non-committal grunt. "We may have to leave soon, I think the Commander's getting a bit annoyed."

"Maybe you should allow her to alter your attire, you may be able to attract the attention of a female companion?" The Arbiter smirked.

"I don't think so. I have more important things to devote my time to."

"Would you care to offer an example?"

John glared at the, now grinning, Arbiter. "What about you then?" He shot back. "Anyâ€¦ pretty Elites catch your eye?"

"I told you Demon, my people fear my presence, no Sangheili will dare to remain in my presence any longer then necessary. Except Mistress Morgamouss, the high cook, but she doesn't respect anyone and looks like a brute with scales."

"Arbiter! Arbiter!" The cry came from a small Grunt who was waddling towards the table at its maximum velocity. "Come quick! Biegg and Equii are fighting!"

The Arbiter groaned and rose to his feet. "I swear Demon, I'm never working with Unggoy again!"

John watched the Arbiter follow the agitated Grunt over to where two of its fellows were fighting.

The Arbiter displayed an effective and subtle technique to make them stop; he grabbed each one by the scruff of the neck and smashed them face first into one another until one, or both, stopped struggling.

"Now," he growled to the dazed Unggoy, "why were you fighting?"

"Uhâ€¦ we no fighting." Piped up the first Grunt to recover.

"Don't lie to me." The Arbiter warned. "Remember, an Arbiter can see into the depths of your soul!"

Both Unggoy let out a squeal. "We sorry Excellency, we justâ€¦ Biegg justâ€¦ me justâ€¦"

"Out with it!" Snapped the irritated Sangheili.

"Equii say hamburgers are a fruit!" Biegg pointed an accusing finger at Equii. "But they obviously a vegetable!"

John thought the Arbiter would throttle them then and there, but the Elite showed amazing restraint.

"Do either of you actually know what a hamburger is?" He asked in a sinisterly calm voice that managed to be far more terrifying then the shouting.

"Uhâ€¦" Equii glanced at Biegg.

"Umâ€¦" Biegg blanched.

The Arbiter opened his mouth to say something, then clamped his mandibles closed and turned to John. "A little help here Demon?"

"Hamburgers are wheat, vegetable, cheese and meat based products." John glowered. "Very soon there is a likelihood of 'Grunt' being added to that list."

"Right." Equii and Biegg looked at one another, then at John's ferocious glare. "Me want to go now."

The Arbiter set the two down and they couldn't scurry off fast enough, clambering over one another in their haste to get away.

"Let it be known that Unggoy can really annoy me." The Arbiter hissed angrily, sinking back into his seat, which creaked slightly in a worrying manner.

"Right," John gave a half-smile, "so we were talking about finding you a womaâ€¦"

"That's it Chief!" The enraged snarl came from somewhere to the left of John's shoulder.

He turned guiltily to find Miranda, Belle and the maintenance girl looming over him. "What's the problem Commander?"

"In a few minutes I'm going to be late for an appointment with Lord Hood, but I refuse to leave until the task I set out to do is completed. So you are going to stand and march off back that store and you are going to find something to wear! That is an order!"

Casting the Arbiter a despairing look, John picked up his helmet and stomped back to the torture rackâ€¦ uh, I mean clothes shop.

Chuckling slightly, the Arbiter drained the last dregs of his coffee. "All of a sudden I'm feeling much better."

"Oh yeah?" Belle snapped over her shoulder as she followed after the Master Chief. "Well we're doing you next!"

5. Christmas

_Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

_

_Hi everyone, this is my Christmas Present to you! Please enjoy and remember to R&R. _

4. Christmas

"By the Forerunners, what happened here?" The Arbiter strode through the halls of the Cairo, peering around him in mixed interest and horror. He reached down for his plasma rifle, preparing in case of a Flood assault. "There is no telling what manner of beast would leave such chaos in its wake."

He advanced cautiously toward one of the doors that led into the main complex. He tapped in the access code and bounded through.

The Arbiter suddenly roared as he saw a beast rear up above him. "Flood scum!" He raised his rifle and fired.

And only received a sad clicking noise for his troubles as he realized too late that he wasn't allowed to take active weapons onto the human's main base.

He flung the useless item aside and prepared to do battle with tooth and claw as his ancestors had once done.

"Arbiter! What are you doing?" The sudden shout caused the Arbiter to pause.

The Flood-creature rustled suddenly and the familiar helmeted head of the Master Chief appeared.

The Chief grunted and set the creature on the ground before stepping out from behind it and wandering over to the perplexed Arbiter.

"I see you haveâ€¦ killed it?" The Arbiter hazarded.

"Killed?" The Chief sounded confused. "What are you on about?"

That beast." The Arbiter motioned with a claw. "I see you have slain the foul thing."

"Foulâ€¦ thingâ€¦?" The Chief turned to face the Flood-thing before turning back to the Arbiter. "Uhâ€¦ Arbiterâ€¦ that's a Christmas tree."

"A tree?" The Arbiter eyed the offending object. "It is like no manner of foliage I have ever seen before. And if it is merely a tree then how do you explain the carnage I witnessed just outside this room?"

"Carnageâ€¦?"

"It looked like Flood spores, green furry objects spattered with red and a white spore coating everything." The Arbiter continued to glare at the tree.

"They're Christmas decorations." Sometimes the Chief could be exasperated by the Arbiter's naivete. "That's green tinsel, plastic berries and spray-on snow."

"Plastic?" The Arbiter hissed. "How may one consume plastic fruit? What purpose does it serve?"

"No purpose." Admitted the Chief. "But Miranda insisted that I put them up."

"Is thisâ€¦ treeâ€¦ also plastic?" Inquired the Arbiter.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because of a commercial holiday celebrated by people everywhere." The Chief inspected the tree. "Humans decorate with the approved colors, give each other gifts and just generally waste time."

"You say that as if you're not a human." The Arbiter cocked his head on one side. "Do you feel so distanced from your own kind?"

"I just don't like holidays that no one in their right mind should consider wasting time on."

"Days of festival are hardly wasted." The Arbiter growled. "They form an integral part of your cultural heritage."

"If you really feel that way." The Master Chief dragged a large box into view. "You can help me get the tree decoration over with."

"What's wrong sir?" Commander Miranda Keyes cautiously approached high Commander Hood.

"Hmm?" Hood halted his brooding and turned to face Miranda. "Repeat, Keyes."

"You look a littleâ€¦" Miranda strove for the right word. "Distant."

"It's nothing Commander." Hood fixed her with his level gaze. "Just a minor diplomacy issue."

"With the Covenant?"

"At the Christmas banquet this Christmas Eve." Lord Hood elaborated. "I have invited several major Sangheili officials to the proceedings and they have offered to bring a selection of their own cuisine."

"Grubs and berries sir?" Miranda couldn't hide the slight smile twitching the corners of her mouth.

"A crude but accurate interpretation." Hood glared at the lesser Commander. "My political advisors tell me that, as a show of good faith, it would be wise to sample these comestibles. And I imagine the Sangheili won't let me off with just the berries."

"Maybe Johnson can assist you there." Miranda, only half jokingly, offered. "The man eats anything once it's stopped wriggling."

"I thank you for your support Miranda but I will have to bear this on my own." He turned to stare out of the main window at the panoramic view of Earth. "I do this for the good of us all."

"You make it sound so serious sir."

"Believe it or not Miranda, more battles are won and lost over a single forkful of foreign cuisine than all the bloodshed in the universe."

"I'll try to keep that in mind sir."

"RECLAIMER!" The mechanical hum of Guilty Spark's voice rose to a shriek as he soared through the halls of the Cairo. "I require your assistance!"

He halted in front of a console as the avatar of Cortana sprang up. "Ah, Construct, I must know where the Reclaimer resides."

"He's over that way." Cortana pointed further down the hall, while stifling a giggle. "Forth door on theâ€¦ the right." Despite being an artificial construct, Cortana was finding it a struggle not to burst into a fit of laughter.

"Excellent. This matter must be seen to." Spark glided away down the hall.

John was just coming out of his quarters when he was confronted by the enraged Monitor.

"Reclaimer, I need to call on your assistance again in this most vexing of matters."

"What is it?" The face of the Master Chief, behind his helmet, didn't so much as flicker.

"A most frightful transgression has been made. An error of judgement, if you will.

"What can I do?"

"Well, Reclaimer, this task that I require seems only to be left in your hands as no other has seen fit to offer assistance and since I am at disadvantage as far as the number of Sentinels in my service is the equivalent of zero, so, therefore, I must ask you, no, almost implore of you Reclaimer toâ€¦ take this garish object off me!"

The Chief leaned forward and carefully inspected the Santa hat that had been, so forcefully, rammed down atop the Monitor. "Yes, that could be a problem."

"It reduces my ocular array to fifty percent capacity."

"I can see that."

"Also it has reduced my general status among your comrades to the point where they express great humor at my appearance."

"Sounds right."

"So demonâ€¦ will you assist me."

The Master Chief stared at Guilty Spark for a long, drawn out minute. "No." He shook his head slowly. "Sorry, I'm too busy. Besides, it's good to see you getting into the spirit."

"Reclaimerâ€¦" Pleaded Spark, but the Chief already began to close his door.

Guilty Spark hissed angrily. "Of all the races in the universe to be Reclaimers, why humans?!?"

"This must the most unorthodox situation the council have faced! Never has a situation like this happened before! Human festivals

indeed, the nerve! Do they expect us to invite them to our ceremonies?"

"Don't see what your problem is Wonder!" High cook Grea 'Morgamouss spat through her mandibles. "You don't have to do anything."

The Prophet of Wonder, hunched in his hovering chair in a corner of Grea's bustling kitchen glowered at the massive, thickset Sangheili. "It's a matter of principals Mistress Morgamouss. The humans act as if their customs are on par with our own!"

"You mean the customs the Prophets forced upon us?" Grea chuckled throatily.

"I mean the Covenant as a whole." Wonder's eyes narrowed. He was a minor Prophet, and one of the few who had objected strongly to Truth's ideals and his incrimination of the Sangheili. He had been saved from execution during the uprising by Grea herself, who had taken the Prophet to the docking bay and had 'persuaded' (mostly by shouting) an Elite Zealot to allow him safe passage on his vessel. Wonder now made up a small percentage of the Covenant council that was now composed of representatives of each race in the 'new Covenant;' Sangheili, Wonder, Lekgolo, Unggoy, and Humans.

"Whatever you say noble Prophet." Grea shrugged, stomping off to yell at a group of lower cooks that she deemed necessary to shout at.

Wonder shook his head in bemusement. "All these meetings and for what? So the humans are allowed to enforce their will within the Covenant? I cannot allow it!"

"Easy holy one." A deep voice soothed from behind the Prophet. "Unless you'd like to join the Prophet of Chastity in the cells."

Wonder didn't even bother turning around. "Commander Half-jaw, if Grea finds you in her kitchen again then she says, Commander or not, you are due for a belt across the skull."

Half-jaw's remaining mandibles twisted into a slight smirk, "you judge me unfairly."

"She says that anyone who can sneak food into his mouth without parting his mandibles should not be anywhere near it."

"Then, if you'll pardon me, allow Grea to tell me this herself." Half-jaw suddenly felt a large hand clamp down on the back of his neck.

A husky voice growled behind him, "if you don't get out from under my feet Commander, I'll be forced to throw you out."

"Now my dear Grea 'Morgamouss." Half-jaw sighed. "How likely do either you or I believe that to be?"

Several seconds later, when Half-jaw landed on his behind in the hall outside the kitchen, he was shocked to find that he wasn't at all surprised.

"That's it!" Johnson fumed as he headed into towards the Cairo's mall area. "The next Marine that I catch singing Christmas jingles gets court marshaled!" He trudged into the massive shopping-area. "Ohâ€| myâ€| What the hell's going on in here!?!"

He suddenly had to duck as an Elite with a jetpack soared past.

"Ah, Johnson!" The familiar figure of the Arbiter, laden down as he was with Christmas decorations, bounded over. "I trust you are well."

"What's the hell is all this?" Johnson gestured around at the hive of activity in the surrounding area.

"Oh, well, we're justâ€| helping decorate the Cairo." The Arbiter waved at a Sangheili who was in the middle of stringing up some tinsel near the roof. "My people have elected to help."

"Why?"

"Because, during the war with Earth, we were forced to cancel all our minor festivals." Said the Arbiter with an expansive gesture, causing him to drop several decorations. "And, well, all the major ones are such solemn affairs so there's been no chance to do any decorating. So now this chance came up everyone wants to offer his or her assistance. And, well, we're hardly going to string up Christmas decorations around our own ships, it's just not done."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Johnson sighed. He turned and peered out of one of the main windows of the station. He stiffened. "Arbiter," Johnson's voice was dangerously calm, "why is the MAC gun covered in tinsel?"

The Arbiter looked up. "Oh that, well, my brothers got a bit carried away, I'll warrant, but it certainly enhances the Christmas theme."

"Arbiter." Johnson growled. "Take it off, now."

"Certainly not!" The Arbiter snapped. "It took absolutely ages to get all that tinsel up there, even with Phantoms. We had to use about five kilometers of the stuff to cover the whole thing. Oh, now don't look at me like that, the gun can still fire if we suddenly were to forsake the treaty and attack. And it's like a giant Christmas tree. Apparently you can see it all the way from Earth."

Johnson glared up at the tinsel-covered MAC gun as he clenched and unclenched his fists.

Then he turned and stormed out of the mall. "I'm too tired for this sort of crap."

"Ah, Johnson." The large blue eye of 343 Guilty Spark suddenly filled Johnson's vision. "I require your assistance."

Johnson glowered at the monitor. Then at the Christmas hat still

rammed over the top of him. Then back at the gleaming eye. "You know, I just don't care any more." Johnson pushed past Guilty Spark and stormed away.

Guilty Spark watched him go, then mused to himself, "the first Reclaimer asked me, 'if it were me, would I activate the rings?' Having had ample time to ponder this query I have decidedâ€¦ yes. Even if only out of spite!"

"Right, how do I look?" John, AKA, the Master Chief, Spartan 117, stood up and turned to face Cortana.

She grinned and nodded. "Looking very different Chief. Looks like you got something out of your date with Miranda."

"It wasn't a date." Snapped John. "She just took me shopping. Besides, there were two other girls with us."

"Well, well, go Chief." Cortana snickered.

"Shut up."

"Okay, okay, sorry Chief." Cortana held up her hands submissively. "You look good."

John had, in fact, managed to get something out his brief shopping trip. Currently what he'd got was a dark green button-down top cut especially to fit his massive frame. A large pair of new shoes and a pair of formal black trousers completed the look. Unfortunately the dark colors set off the paleness of his skin.

"Well, I'd better go." He strode over to the door.

"Good luck Chief," Cortana called encouragingly.

John grunted in acknowledgement.

"Ah, Reclaimer," a shrill voice greeted John as he marched into the hall, "could you help remove this haâ€¦"

"No."

"Reclaimersâ€¦" Guilty Spark muttered as John stomped past him. "I would sooner exist without them."

The banquet was being partaken in Lord Hood's private feast hall. The massive figure of Grea 'Morgamouss shuffled around the table, gently setting down various Sangheili foodstuffs with a decisive clink.

Lord Hood himself stood by the window of the large room, looking out at Earth far below.

"The Elites may take a while longer." Said Grea, "most are Councilors and they are renowned for turning up late."

"They shouldn't arrive for another three minutes and thirty-six seconds." Said Hood primly.

"Veryâ€| exact." Said Grea, setting down a deep bowl with a cover, from within which various squirming sounds were filtering out.

Lord Hood wrinkled his nose. "Sangheili don't really eat insects do they?"

"No," murmured Grea soothingly, "we prefer worms." She set the last bowl down and, chuckling slightly, trudged out of the room, pushing along a hovering trolley.

"Good evening sir," Miranda Keyes entered the room, edging past the departing form of Grea, Sergeant Johnson trailing along after her.

Johnson was dressed in his starched white Naval uniform, while Miranda had managed to dig up a pale, blue gown.

"Johnson." Hood turned away from the window and sighed. "This isn't a military gathering."

"You're wearing your whites too, sir." Retorted Johnson.

"I'm representing Earth's armed forces." Said Hood. "Fortunately Miranda seems to have a better grasp of the concept of a formal dinner."

"Don't have any other pansy-wear, sir." Said Johnson smugly.

"Lord Hood, sir." The Master Chief entered the room, a selection of other humans trailing after in his wake, all dressed for the occasion.

"Looks like everyone's here." Hood did a quick headcount. "That just leaves the Sanghâ€|"

"Greetings humans." The massive frame of the Arbiter filled the doorway. Aside from a slight armor waxing no alterations had been made to his appearance. He bowed. "I, on behalf of all Sangheili due to be present, thank you for your courtesy."

"Good evening Arbiter." Lord Hood nodded in acknowledgement. "Good to see you."

The Arbiter nodded in return, then glanced at the table, "ah, I see you have acquired some larger seating arrangements."

"We borrowed them from a Sangheili vessel." Said Miranda.

"I had noticed that." The Arbiter smiled, "and now we'd best be seated, because the Councilors are unlikely to arrive on time."

As those in the banquet room arranged themselves a seat, a selection of Elites entered.

About half a dozen in all, all Zealots as well as the current High Commander.

They were wearing their dress-armor, much like their regular armor but less bulky and white in color with gold edging.

Gliding in after came a group of female Sangheili. They wore loose shirts, done in a toga-like style and skirts that reached down to their ankles with a slit down the front and back.

Finally the Councilors entered, in full regalia, having to duck slightly to fit their massive helmets under the doorway.

The Arbiter rose from his seat, bowing his head. "Ah, you have arrived."

"Greetings Arbiter, I'm afraid Wonder decided not to join us." Commander Half-jaw smirked from among the group of Commanders. "I trust we are on time?"

"Yeah, whatever, just get yourselves a seat." Said Johnson expansively.

The Arbiter turned and glowered. "I believe Johnson had intended to say something respectful but ultimately failed. Nonetheless, I advise we follow his instruction." He motioned to the Sangheili-sized chairs.

When the Elites were seated, the Arbiter sunk back down into his own chair, on the edge of the group, next to John.

"Right," Lord Hood addressed the assembled, "I suppose we can begin, unless you have any necessary customs to perform." He added hurriedly.

"No, you are correct Commander Hood." Said a Councilor. "Let the banquet begin."

Five minutes in and Lord Hood saw a flaw in the whole plan. A little too much formality was being put in to, what was supposed to be a casual meal. And neither the humans nor the Sangheili seemed willing to exchange small talk with the other, so maybe clumping to two races' chairs together might not have been such a good plan.

Only the Arbiter and the Master Chief seemed comfortable enough to talk to one-another, but it was merely exchanging old battle-stories, so not much of a dinner conversation.

"We need something to break the ice." Hood muttered to Miranda.

"Any suggestions?" She whispered back.

Lord Hood glanced over at the Elites.

They were, without a doubt, completely alien. Their plates were more of large bowls and their cups were wide-brimmed to accommodate their mandibles.

And their cutlery was completely bizarre. They consisted of gleaming

thimble-like objects, worn over each finger, with a sharp point at the end. This meant that it was actually good-manners to eat with their fingers!

And as for what they ate— Lord Hood felt queasy just watching them raise the squirming things up to their mandibles, whereupon a long thin tongue would shoot from the Sangheili's throat and drag the offering into their mouth.

"A problem, Commander?" Asked Half-jaw.

"No, none." Hood hurriedly looked away.

"Once again Demon, I fear this treaty may need to be worked at." The Arbiter muttered.

"You're probably right." John nodded. He glanced at the line of Sangheili, at caught ones eye.

The Elite continued to eat, as if it couldn't see the Chief, while the eye stayed firmly on him.

Finally John couldn't stand any more, "is there something you'd like to say to me?"

"Pardon?" The Elite turned slowly, fixing his gaze at John.

"You were staring at me." John growled.

"Hardly." Chuckled the Elite, "I can't even see out of that side." He tapped the eye. "It's glass, sorry if it bothers you."

"Oh." John's face hardly changed its expression. "How did that happen?"

"A human caught me a blow in the face with the butt of its rifle." The Sangheili smiled slightly. "I'm Zealot Taso 'Ratanalee, by the way."

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise, demon."

Another silence fell over the table.

"Do something." Miranda hissed in Hood's ear.

"Like what?"

"I don't know, eat one of the worms of something. You might earn their respect."

Lord Hood eyed the wriggling things on the Sangheili side of the table. "For Earth—" He muttered.

Suddenly, as he was about to reach over, the main door hissed open and a massive figure strode in.

"Ho ho ho." The towering individual proclaimed, "how goes the banquet?"

The diners merely stared at the red and white clad figure.

Glittering eyes sparkled back from between a bushy white brows, and a white mustache and beard.

"Isâ€| this yourâ€| superior?" Half-jaw hazarded.

"No." Miranda glared at Johnson and Hood.

Lord Hood was looking perplexed, while Johnson was just smirking like he was watching a huge joke unfold.

"Good to see you," the figure strode forwards, "my name's Santa Claus, how's everything going?"

The Arbiter, having prior to the event, been told much about Christmas and the jolly fat man, buried his face in his large glass of fruit juice and prayed that his brothers didn't realize what was happening.

Santa deposited a sack by the wall and landed heavily in a spare Sangheili seat that the diners could have sworn hadn't been there before. "Sorry to interrupt but I have a long night ahead of me and only had time for a quick bite, mind if I join you?" Without waiting for an answer he dragged over a plate and began heaping it with any comestibles, both human and Sangheili, that lay in reach.

The two Elites he'd sat between, a Commander and his mate, stared at him with mixed shock and interest.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" The Arbiter wheezed, finally forced to come up for air.

"Ah, what's to introduce?" Johnson grinned. "Santa, meet aliens, aliens meet Santa. He delivers toys, you know."

"My word." Taso glanced at the Councilors. "I'm surprised he hasn't shown up to any of our other conferences."

"Not my thing." Santa shrugged. "So, humans and Covenant are getting along now, I've waited too long for this. I can finally put all you guys on my nice list."

"That's very decent of you." Acknowledged the Arbiter.

Miranda was attempting to peer behind the man's beard, to figure out who it was.

"I suppose you'd have the Flood on your naughty list," said Johnson, almost innocently.

"I'm not even going to go near them." Santa seemed immersed in Sangheili cuisine. "They'd probably eat my reindeer."

"You have excellent taste in foodstuffs." Said the Elite High Commander appreciatively. "I've never met a human that could stomach our delicacies."

Lord Hood took that as his queue to reach over and add a selection of Mildworms to his plate.

"Pass em' over here Commander." Said Johnson. "I'm in the mood for something a little different."

Glowering, Lord Hood obliged.

"Say, why aren't there any Unggoy around?" Santa theatrically looked about him. "Not good enough to join you?"

"They have different eating habits." Said Half-jaw stiffly. "They can only eat food nipples."

"Are there any on the Council?"

"Of course." Half-jaw snapped. "We have two Unggoy to represent them in the new Covenant."

"Glad to hear it."

"Hey, these worms taste kinda like beef." Sarge shoved a second forkful of the things into his mouth. "Well, like rancid beef covered in vinegar. I know, I've tried."

"I'll bet." Lord Hood stared at his own, first forkful, with distaste.

"If it helps your ingestion," the Arbiter drew a strip of chicken up to his own mandibles and swallowed. "Mmm, tastes like Galagan."

"We have some caramelized Direweb spider eggs if that would be more to your tastes." Offered Taso.

"I'd listen to him, those things taste great." Enthused Santa.

The watching humans released a collective breath as Lord Hood chewed the sticky worms with an unreadable expression.

"Not bad." He said after a moment's hesitation. "Not what I'd call Christmas cuisine, but not too bad for all that."

"You should try some of the Mildworm cocoons next." Offered the Arbiter. "They are pleasantly spicy."

Santa suddenly set down his almost unused utensils. "Right, well thanks for the meal, I'd better be off." He strode over to his sack by the door. "But I do have something for you before I leave." He fished out a small package and tossed it to the Chief. "Got a new ocular array for your armor. Try to look after it this time, that stuff doesn't come cheap." He dragged the sack over to the table and set down a stack of presents. "Just a little gift from Earth for our Sangheili dignitaries. Oh and thisâ€¦" He marched out into the hall and dragged an object into view. "This, isâ€¦"

"Tartarus' hammerâ€¦" The Arbiter breathed.

"I thought you might like it as trophy."

"I'm going to agree." Giggled one of the female Sangheili, noting the

Arbiter's mandibles hanging agape.

"Right, well, as for the rest of you, you'll have enough presents come Christmas day so I'd better shove off." Santa slung the sack over his back.

"Umâ€¦ Mister Claus." Miranda stood up slowly. "I'm probably going to regret this, but would youâ€¦ like to take some carrotsâ€¦ for your reindeerâ€¦" She noticed Lord Hood and Johnson staring at her. "Well come on, some things just _have_ to be done."

"No thanks, they'd probably prefer an apple pie, they're not very big on calorie counting. Well, except Vixen, she's going through a fad where she'll only eat anything orange."

"You know what?" Said one of the Sangheili Councilors as Santa's footsteps receded down the hall, "this has been the best banquet I've ever had."

"So, who did you hire to do that?" Miranda whispered to Lord Hood.

"Me? I didn't get him." Lord Hood glowered at Johnson.

"Don't look at me, I stopped believing in the fat guy when I was out of diapers."

"Then
whoâ€¦?"

As Sangheili Major Grae 'Negrulee stood on the bridge of the Sangheili ship 'the Veiled Shade' he saw a sleigh fly past outside, pulled along by nine reindeer.

Several hours later, he put it down to too much rum.

MERRY CHRâ€¦

"Pardon me?" Guilty Spark snapped. "But we can't have this concluded with me suffering this indignity!"

"Oh shut up, you look great." Cortana sniggered.

"You know, it's moments like this that I despair that my creators didn't design me with a self-destruct protocol."

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

6. Artificial Intelligence

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

_Exclainer: Sorry this took so long, I had a major case of writers block, anyway enjoy.

>

I'd like to thank Sir Loin The First for giving me the idea for this fic.

****5. Artificial Intelligence**
>

"ALRIGHT YOU BLUE EYED BASTARD! YOU'RE GOING TO PAY!" Cortana's shriek echoed around the Cairo.

A flicker appeared momentarily in most consoles throughout the station as Cortana's avatar searched for her target.

"What on Sangheil?" the Arbiter jumped in shock as he came face to face with the enraged AI for a moment before she vanished again. The Elite leapt to his feet and bounded into the hallway. "What's going on?"

With a frown the Arbiter of the Covenant marched away into the winding corridors of the Cairo, seeking the reason for the outburst.

"Absolutely fascinating." Guilty Spark hummed happily as he sorted through the Cairo's data banks. "This categorization though is extremely poor, oh how I will enjoy every moment I spend correcting it!" A sudden surge of power saw Spark hitting the floor with a thump and a mechanical shriek. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I wonder." The avatar of Cortana rose menacingly from a console, towering over the prone monitor. "Alright Spark, talk!"

"Certainly." Guilty Spark hovered up to face her. "What would be the topic of our discussion? Human history between 1969 to 2024? A biological analysis of the Flood? A practical discussion on the differing flavor values of apple and cherry pie?"

"You'd like that wouldn't you?" Cortana fumed. "If you want to know, then look hereâ€¦"

Cortana brought up a program on one of the computer consoles.

It showed a very clear image of Cortana singing a variety of old-style ditties from Earth past.

"Any explanation for this?" Cortana scowled, pausing the images.

"Why certainly." Guilty Spark hummed. "This is my study of Artificial Intelligence Construct behavior when exposed to human emotions. You displayed a variety of expressions and functions that almost certainly weren't included in your original programming."

"And why exactly were a selection of marines taking an interest yourâ€¦ study?"

"I'm certain I have no idea. I merely displayed the results of your elation to certain officials. Your Commander, Miss Keyes, a one Lord

Hood and, also, Sergeant Johnson."

"JOHNSON!?! " Cortana screamed. "You showed Johnson my folk songs? Why didn't you just broadcast it over the main frequency?"

"I believe you are stretching this out of proportion. It was a simple observation of your behavior under conditions of exceptional elation."

"Out of proportion?" Cortana growled. "I am the ship's main AI and controller of its defenses. And now, I'm a laughing stock. All because you were studying me? Studying me?!? I am one of the most superior AI's in the known universe and if you even thinkâ€|"

"I believe you are mistaken miss Cortana." Guilty Spark interrupted. "Certainly you have shown impressive design and dexterity, but I believe that, as a Forerunner creation, I am the superior."

"Oh really?" Cortana set her hands on her hips. "Are you challenging me?"

"I hardly need to."

"Oh yeah? Prove it. If you can beat me in a little contest then I will admit you are truly the more superior." Cortana smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile. "But if I win then you have to allow me to conduct my own study. Of you."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I was thinkingâ€| 'The Guilty Spark hoe-down.' Unless you're afraid that is."

"Afraid? I? Certainly not. I accept your challenge miss Cortana. State the method and manner of this contest."

"Very well, this is what we'll doâ€|"

"Right, I heard the voices around here." The Arbiter halted outside a door, "right here, sounded like an argument."

The Master Chief, Spartan 117, wandered over to the control panel. "Any idea who it was? Or why I should care?"

"Because I think it has something to do with that AI of yours, Cortana." Said the Arbiter.

"Right," the Chief stepped back as the door hissed open.

"Come on." The Arbiter strode into the room and looked around. "What is this place?"

"Basic computer suite." Said the Chief. "Really outdated technology. Most of the marines just use these computers for games."

"How?" The Arbiter looked perplexed. "Do they throw them at one

another?"

"No, there're games on the computers. Based on real life and stuff." The Chief noticed one of the screens was flickering with life. "Looks like someone forgot switch off."

"Or perhaps someone has already 'switched off.'" The Arbiter hoisted aloft a large object from one of the chairs in the room.

It was Guilty Spark.

But the Monitor's usually gleaming eye was dull and he looked almost as if he'd been deactivated. "What could have happened?"

"I don't think he's dead or anything." The Chief wandered over to the computer. "Maybe he's just exploring the Cairo's systems."

"He can separate from his own body?" The Arbiter set Guilty Spark down. "How strange." He followed the Chief's gaze to the computer screen. "Soâ€¦ what is that?"

The screen portrayed some kind of snowy field, featuring cliffs and frozen lakes.

"It's a game." Said the Chief. "One the Marines play sometimes. Called Disk. It's about humans and an alien race fighting over an artificial world in the shape of a circle. It's a shooting game. This is one of the multiplayer levels they always want me to join in with them. They know I've never played a game in my life. This looks like the level they callâ€¦ Widesigner."

The Arbiter shook his head in disbelief. "Sounds bizarre."

"Hmmm." The Chief peered at the screen. "There's only two players. Core and GS."

Core, standing on a cliff in Widesigner, was a violet armored figure, the breastplate styled to give it a more feminine appearance.

She peered thoughtfully through the scope of a sniper rifle. "Where are you?" She breathed.

Suddenly she crumpled to the ground as a shotgun was smacked into the back of her head. "Right here." GS gazed down at the corpse lying in the blood-spattered snow. His armor was azure, and he had a perfectly circular visor. "Sorry miss 'Core' but it appears that I hold the upper hand."

A grenade bounced across the terrain and landed at his feet. "Oh myâ€¦!" In a spectacular explosion, the broken corpse of GS rolled down the side of the cliff as the newly respawned Core strode back into view.

"Sorry Spark," she sneered, "just a few more frags and this game is mine."

"If more UNSC soldiers fought like that we'd have beaten the Covenant ages ago." Said the Chief as he watched GS get blown backwards by a shotgun shell to the chest.

"Oh please." The Arbiter snorted. "Anyone can see GS is the superior."

"Core's winning." The Chief pointed out.

"Ah, but her battlefield tactics are somewhat lax." The Arbiter smirked. "She seems to hunt out GS directly and that makes her vulnerable to his fire."

"Yeah, well GS only goes on the offensive when he finds a Rocket Launcher or the Energy Axe." The Chief growled.

"Ah, Demon, but that is because he seeks to be well armed for the resulting melee, thus displaying more foresight."

"But it leaves him without any way to defend against Core as he's not as effective with the weaker weapons." John pointed out as Core pumped a blast of electricity from the shock pistol through GS' cranium.

"Oh please." Sniffed the Arbiter. "You wait, GS will catch up in due time."

"Unlikely."

"Oh? And do you wish to debate this topic further?"

"You want to challenge me?" The Chief stood up angrily.

"That could be arranged." The Arbiter rose up, his eight-foot-eight frame allowing him to tower over the Chief.

"Perhaps this could be settled best in another fashion." The Chief cast a sideways glance at the flickering screen.

"Indeed?" Inquired the Arbiter. "What do you have in mind?"

Core charged down an icy tunnel, dual-wielded shock rifles smoking slightly after a recent barrage. "Come on out Spark."

"Certainly." GS trotted out from cover to confront her. He pulled out a rocket launcher. "Farewell miss Core!" He suddenly crumpled as he was struck from behind by a red-armored warrior.

Ha! Owed bitch!

"What the?" Core looked up only to be blasted apart by the crossfire of two more soldiers, one cyan, one gold.

Woo hoo! Tak that Purpl!

Hey! U took my kill!

Cant take wot u didn't hav

What resulted was the three figures opening fire on one another.

Elsewhere, Core and GS rematerialized nearby one another. "Looks like we have company." Sighed Core. "Some Marines must have logged on."

"Perhaps we can work this to our advantage." Mused GS. "How about, rather than killing one another we see who canâ€¦ make use of the new arrivals instead."

"I like it." Said Core. "Whoever frags the most marines then."

"Indeed. Although Miss Cortana, you appear to be a point ahead of me already." GS raised a pistol to her temple.

Core scowled. "Oh you son of
aâ€¦"

With a brief flash, two more figures appeared in Widesigner.

One was dressed in olive green armor, while the other was one of the furry, three-jawed aliens that acted as antagonists in the game. It was dressed in silver armor.

Outside the game, the Arbiter carefully seated himself at a console and peered over the keys. "Right Demon, thanks for, er, 'logging me on.' Uhâ€¦ which one am I?"

"The alien." Said the Chief simply.

"Yes, I note that that one bears the name 'Assbiter.'" The Arbiter scowled.

"Yes." The Chief nodded.

"I hate you."

"Whatever, let's just start."

"Very well." The Arbiter eyed the holographic keyboard. "Umâ€¦ how?"

Elsewhere, a golden-armored marine was climbing into the seat of a battle jeep, known affectionately as the 'Bull,' when a shock grenade stuck to his back and he exploded in a shower of sparks.

Ha! Take that noob! A red marine strode over, only to take a sniper bullet through the skull.

"And one more for me." From her vantage point on a cliff edge Core smirked under her helmet.

Take this purple! Core sidestepped as an azure marine charged past from where he'd originally been attempting to strike her with his rifle.

He continued going and plunged off the cliff, even as Core plugged two shots into him on the way down.

Suddenly a rocket shot past her, blowing up the 'Armadillo' tank that had been lining her up for a shot far below her position.

"Thanks Spark." She growled icily.

Clambering over the edge and plunging the final distance with an easy landing, Core darted for a patch of rocks for both cover, in case GS decided that the truce was void, and also as a place to await any marines foolish enough to cross her path.

As she crouched down, she witnessed a strange sight.

A green-armored figure ran past her, backwards while firing wildly at the sky.

Shortly after a silver-armored alien ran past with a rocket launcher before colliding with a wall and firing, blowing himself up in the process.

Demon! I can't understand the controls!

I know I can't get the guy to stop shooting.

You're holding down the wide button, I think that one fires.

It's called a spacebar and you know it!

Whatever, mine appears to be watching his feet now.

Then look up!

I don't know how!

Maybe I can plug my helmet into the console andâ€¦

Don't even think about it!

Core sighed and shot them both.

As three marines elsewhere engaged themselves in a firefight, a carefully thrown grenade reduced them to a smoldering pile of ash.

"Umâ€¦ I believe the term is owned." GS turned to seek out his next victim, only to see a green-armored warrior jog past at a leisurely pace.

Backwards.

Crap. Crap. Crap. Crap. Crap.

Perhaps some more practice Demon. A silver-armored alien materialized in front of him and swung an energy axe clumsily, missing altogether.

Speak for yourself Assbiter!

I have the faintest amount of belief that I was.

It's the keyboard, It's screwed up.

Maybe your fingers are too thick for the intricacies of modern technology.

Maybe you need to trim your nails!

Claws are a natural appendage for Sangheili!

How about you paint them a different color at least?

Demonâ€¦

Decorate them with stick-on flowers maybe?

Alright that's it!

The Energy axe impacted with MC's skull, scoring the combat equivalent of a head-shot.

Fragged Demon.

His victory was short-lived as GS slammed his Shotgun into the back of Assbiter's head.

"This is it," Core breathed quietly to herself. She'd scored a total of 29 kills, using almost every weapon available in Disc's repertoire. With only one frag to go and only a shock pistol left, she knew this was the endgame, and she'd have to move fast.

She stood up carefully, from her position behind a boulder and peered around.

She suddenly gave a cry and ducked back down as a rocket soared past her head.

"Oh miss Cortana!" From a position behind within the doorway of a bunker, GS reloaded his last remaining Rocket into the barrel. "I'm on my last kill, how are you doing."

"Much the same." Core growled back.

"Then how about we make this our final duel?" GS smirked under his helmet. "The lastâ€¦ frag." As he said that he hurled a grenade at Core.

It curved through the air and rolled behind the boulder.

Core dived from her position, but even as she did so the blast caught her in such a way that her shields were knocked down to twenty-percent power.

GS leapt from his own cover and loosed a Rocket at the exposed AI, only to be diverted slightly by three balls of white-hot electrical energy fired from Core's remaining weapon.

Core managed to avoid the Rocket as she charged towards GS, her shields now responding zero.

She covered the remaining ground at an easy lope, her pistol now shaking with the effort of holding in the electrical charge.

When she judged the range to be right she released the pent-up energy in a single, battery draining burst.

GS sidestepped, but the ball of energy curved in its flight, as if drawn to him, and impacted with his chest.

Core finally reached the reeling monitor. "Endgame Spark."

The last thing he saw was Core's fist speeding towards his visor.

"Eh, I dunno." Johnson mused. "I never really liked folk-songs. But seein them done by a grudging Monitor just makes them work somehow."

"Be silent." Guilty Spark hummed.

"The holy Oracle does an impressive rendition of 'A Sangheili Summer.'" Said Half-jaw appreciatively as he eyed the massive screen on which the 'Guilty Spark hoe-down (a compilation of 343 of your all-time favorite folk-songs)' was being broadcast.

"I think he pulled off the dance-moves quite well for someone without any arms." Cortana crossed her arms over her chest and grinned.

"I said be silent!" Guilty Spark trilled.

"I enjoyed the cross-cultural references." Admitted Miranda, "some of those Grunt songs are very interesting."

"And of course the Oracle was able to provide the high-pitched voice required for them." Snickered Taso 'Ratanalee.

"I say he should show this to some of his Sentinel pals." Said

Johnson. "I bet they'd be very interested."

"BE QUIET!" Guilty Spark wailed. "This is humiliating enough!"

"Hey, uh, has anyone seen the Chief lately?" A girl from Maintenance piped up. "He's usually made a discriminatory remark about me by now."

"Come to that I haven't seen the Arbiter in a while." Said Half-jaw. "I wonder where he's gotten to."

Elsewhereâ€|

"Oh, I see, the bent-arrow button makes you jump."

"It's called the enter button Assbiter!"

"Hey, you're still running backwards!"

"Don't make me blow your head off."

"Please, you couldn't hit the blindside of an unconscious Lekgolo."

"Watch it or I'll give you a blindside!"

"Big words for someone of a mere seven-foot stature!"

"Just because you're losingâ€|"

"I'd hardly call having a score of negative two a victory."

"At least I don't carry around proof of my failure on my chest!"

"Oh, low-blow Demon. Of course, from way down there I imagine that's pretty easy."

"Alright that's it!"

"Bring it human!"

7. Sangheilios

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

A/N: Sorry this is up so late, an Unggoy got me upside the head with a 'Writers Block' and I just lost the thread. Anyway, here it is.

****Sangheil****

"â€| And I cannot stress how apologetic I am for that last interrogation, I felt half of those questions were quite

unnecessary."

"It's alright, really."

"Honestly though, they actually asked you what race you were. Three times!"

"Yes, okay, so that did strike me as kind of oddâ€|"

"Customs have been on a steady decline since a decade ago. Since Brutes started visiting Sangheil at any rate." Pausing at the main doors of the spaceport complex, the Arbiter sighed and motioned for his companions to follow him.

He led them out onto a long, winding wooden path that was arrayed far above the ground, halfway up the massive trees surrounding them.

Trudging along after the Arbiter came Miranda Keyes, a pair of unarmed UNSC soldiers, a skittish-looking girl from Maintenance and the Master Chief.

Correction, he was simply John for the day, and looking dismissively around at his surroundings. Clad simply in a green singlet and shorts, his pale skin gleaming with a thick layer of sunscreen, John was not at all comfortable in Sangheil's sweltering atmosphere.

Finally, bringing up the rear, were two Sangheili, both female, as could be noted from their pale blue plumes, carrying the luggage.

"Trust me Arbiter," Miranda sighed. "Earth customs aren't much better."

"Hmmm?" The Arbiter, hefting a quantity of the remaining baggage onto his own shoulders, turned to her. "Really?"

"Oh yeah."

"The one thing that bothered me was that they must've checked me six times for concealed weapons." Muttered John.

"Yes, and each time they found something new." Said the Arbiter dryly. He glanced back at the two Sangheili. "Are you young ladies managing alright?"

"Certainly Arbiter." Sniffed one with a slight bow. "It's as light as a newborn Unggoy."

"Good." Grunted the Arbiter. "Now miss Keyes, allow me to escort you to the main Council hall. There will be room and board there for you upon arrival."

"Right, let's get this over with." Miranda sighed.

"I hardly think your meeting with the Sangheili council can be 'got over with.'" Snapped the Arbiter. "Tryst's such as this are the foundation of the new Covenant."

"Did I really need to come for this?" John growled as the party set off across the winding path.

"Come on Chief." Piped up on of the marines. "You're in the midst of the alien's homeworld. This should be like a dream for you."

"Yeah, but in those dreams I'm fully armored and holding a pair of smoking SMG's while explosions go off in the background."

"I don't think we need that kind of talk here John." Murmured Miranda with a sideways glance at their Sangheili escort.

"Hey Commander, check out the view from up here!" The maintenance girl pointed out into the sprawling jungle canopy, crisscrossed with yet more of the wooden pathways that went from Sangheili building to building.

And what buildings they were, huge hulking constructs that stood among the trees like giant, metal bees nests, from the wide, squat communal buildings, each one able to house hundreds of Sangheili families comfortably, to the huge space port from which they'd arrived, to the towering council dwelling, that rose up far above the trees.

Suddenly something buzzed past the girl's face.

"Aah! What was that?"

"Nothing to be alarmed about." Sighed the Arbiter. "A harmless insect."

"It was huge!"

"That? That was nothing." The Arbiter scoffed. "You should see a fully grown Direweb spider. They can get to be as big as your torso!"

"I want to go home now." Squeaked the maintenance girl, gripping Johns arm for emotional support, only for the Spartan to shake her off with a growl.

"Calm yourself." Murmured one of the other Sangheili. "Most only grow to be half that size."

"Thank the Forerunners that's done with." Striding out of the Council house, the Arbiter glanced around at the sun-dappled 'streets.' "Now we appear to have an afternoon free Demon."

John trudged wearily out after the Sangheili, squinting in the harsh light.

"Unless," the Arbiter glanced back, "you'd rather stay with Miss Keyes and deal with negotiations?" John scowled. "I suppose not. Very well, let us proceed."

"Where to?"

The Arbiter huffed. "Does it matter? If I left you alone _you'd_ never figure out the difference between a Sangheili food hall and a waste disposal."

"Shut up Assbiter."

The Arbiter led them off the main path and onto a narrow causeway. "Have you ever considered consulting a psychiatrist Demon?"

"Why?" John narrowed his eyes.

"Ohâ€¦ no reason!" The Arbiter glanced around, "you know, in all this excitement I haven't broken my morning fast, would you like something to eat?"

"Whatever." Before John could react something flew out of the jungle canopy and bounced off his head.

The Arbiter caught it on the rebound.

John whirled around, as another object hurtled straight towards him, only for him to catch it easily.

It looked like some kind of yellow fruit, not quite as large as a melon, and covered with lumps.

"Alright," John growled, "when I find out who's doing that I'm gonnaâ€¦!"

"Calm yourself Demon." Said the Arbiter soothingly. "Some youths must have overheard us. Children, if you'd like to come forward!" He called into the jungle.

After a moment's hesitation, a young Sangheili leapt out of a nearby tree and landed neatly on the rail several meters away.

It was barechested and clad in a pair of loose trousers that ended just above its ankles.

It was about five-foot high and a tail extended out behind it, currently wrapped around the rail.

"Ah, Tyri," the Arbiter smiled. "How long have you been following us?"

"Only a little way Great One." The smaller Sangheili quavered. "We just wanted to find out what all the Rukans were here for." (_A/N: "Roo-Kans"_)

"Rukans?" John cocked an eyebrow.

"Humans." Muttered the Arbiter. He then nodded to the cringing adolescent. "Trust me child, if curiosity was a sin we'd never find out anything. I was merely escorting a human delegation to the Council house. This is one of them," he motioned to John, "a personal friend of mine the Deâ€¦ erâ€¦ John. John, meet Tyri."

"Hi." John nodded.

"Tyri here is the son of an old acquaintance of mine, Josa 'Talomee. In fact, Tyri if you see your father, tell him Taso wants to speak to him. Something about his platoon and their decision to decorate Taso's quarters without prior warning."

"They repainted it?" Tyri cocked his head on one side.

"And repositioned the bed."

"Where?"

"Last I heard, on the roof." The Arbiter chuckled.

"When Father finds out about that he'll make them whimper like Grunts." Promised Tyri.

"Interesting, because that's what half of them, in fact were. Well Tyri I won't keep you." Said the Arbiter meaningfully.

"Alright Great One." The child bobbed his head in a quick bow, then leapt off the railing and disappeared among the trees.

"A Sangheili youth has a tail until he reaches full maturity." Said the Arbiter, noting John's quizzical look. "Whereupon it shrivels away, to be replaced by raw muscle."

"Is it safe for children to be in the trees like that?"

"Demon, when a Sangheili falls from a tree he clearly has no right to be in it." The Arbiter struck the fruit he was holding with his claw.

John peered at his own with a worried frown. "What is it?"

"Yanta fruit, a favored delicacy of the Mildworms." The Arbiter pried it apart.

John recoiled in horror, for the fruit was full of long, grey grubs.

"Ah, I see it's ripe." The Arbiter murmured appreciatively. "The adult moth lays her eggs in the fruit as it's growing. Her eggs hatch, and slowly devour the fruit around them, excepting the stone-hard seeds. When fully ripe, the Mildworms become so engorged that the fruit drops from the tree bough and falls to the ground, spreading the seeds and allowing the worms to begin their new lifecycle."

"I think I'm going to pass." John looked warily at the fruit in his own hand.

"If you don't want it, throw it over the side." Said the Arbiter, through a mouthful of Mildworms.

John did so without hesitation.

"Your appetite has not been damaged I trust?" The Arbiter smirked.

"Shut up

Assbiter."

"Demon, I would ask, nay implore of you, just this once to be on your best behavior."

"What?" John glowered. "What do you mean?"

"I'm serious." The Arbiter fixed John with a stare. "I have to perform a very important errand and the last thing I need is you insulting someone."

"Rightâ€|" John raised an eyebrow. "What errand is this?"

"You'll see. Oh, and please refer to me by my appointed title for the duration if you would."

"So, no Assbiter?"

"Precisely."

"Whatever."

"In fact, it may be necessary for you to refrain completely from verbalizing your thoughts, due to a tendency for them to upset the balance of a Sangheili's psyche."

John stared at him.

"Very well, come on Demon."

The Arbiter led them down a selection of footpaths, up to one of the communal buildings on the outskirts of the Sangheili City.

They walked over to one of the doorways leading into the massive structure. The Arbiter held up a hand. "Halt here Deâ€| erâ€| John. A respectful distance is necessary for this task." The Arbiter reached out, his hand passing over a small panel near the door. A buzzing echoed from within.

After a moment or two, the door slid open with a hiss.

A Sangheili poked her head out.

She was thin, and clad in a ragged robe of a coarse brown material, the plume on her head was pale grey and pressed down against her skull.

Her scales were flaky, and her eyes were dull.

As she saw the Arbiter, her eyes widened and she fell to her knees, "holy one, to what ends do you wish to serve here with me?"

"Rise please, you do not need to bow to me." The Arbiter murmured awkwardly.

The Sangheili rose, slowly and painfully, to her feet.

"You areâ€¦ Esi 'Rofum?"

"Yes lord."

"Thenâ€¦ I bring you a messageâ€¦ from myselfâ€¦ personally." The Arbiter shuffled his hooves, glancing worriedly at Esi. "I would like toâ€¦ apologise, to you. Through actions wherein I sought to serve the collective will of the Covenant I, inadvertently, slew your father on counts of Heresy. It was a grievous error on my part for I see now how he would have made a potent ally in our civil war. I just want you to know that he met his end with honor, and were I able to, I would gladly resurrect him."

Esi watched the Arbiter carefully. "Indeed Arbiter?"

The Arbiter nodded, then reached behind his shoulder and detached a silvery rectangular object from his armor. "I would like to give you this, as a token of my sincerest regret."

Esi took the object from his outstretched hand, watching it like one might watch a bomb.

"Erâ€¦ it is a box of Earth delicacies," said the Arbiter hurriedly, "called Cho-co-lates, they are quite palatable."

"Thank you Arbiter." Esi bowed her head. "Will there be anything else."

"No, I will not take up any more of your time." The Arbiter returned the bow and hastily made his exit, John trailing after him.

Esi watched them leave.

"Alright Arbiter, who was that?" Asked John when he judged them to be out of earshot.

"Esi 'Rofum, daughter of Sesa 'Refumee." Said the Arbiter. "Her father was expelled from the Covenant on accounts of Heresy, due to knowledge he gleaned from the Oracle, Guilty Spark. Esi used to live well, as her father was a well-respected member of the armada, but when he was branded she was offered two choices, one, to disown her father and continue to live in plenty, or to be stripped of her title and live in poverty. She chose the latter."

"You've got to respect that kind of devotion." Said John with an appreciative whistle.

"Indeed. Especially now it is proven that her father was right all along."

"That's gotta screw you up pretty bad, huh?"

"Thanks very much Demon." Sighed the Arbiter.

"Were there any other Heretics?"

"Yes, a myriad number."

"You going to apologise to each of their families then?"

"Demon," the Arbiter sighed, "I am most regretful of poor Esi because she is the one who has suffered most at my hands, even indirectly. The other Heretics, though, were considered merely brainwashed stooges of Sesa's, so their families suffered little more than slight rejection from their peers." He wandered over to the balustrade and looked out over the jungle. "They have more left than even I."

"But you're the Arbiter." John pointed out.

"Indeed. But everything else has been taken from me. All I have left now is respect and admiration." The Arbiter glanced at John, "don't give me that look. You of all people know that that isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"Yeah, alright. Then how'd you get the chocolates?"

"I asked Miranda to purchase them for me. When I told her they were for a girl she started giggling. Any idea why?"

"None whatsoever." John smiled slightly. "Definitely none whatsoever."

8. Nephew

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe._

Exclaimer: Sorry for the long lapse between updates, my computer broke down and left me without a keyboard to stand on. Write on, whatever. Anyway, I'm back now so, without further complaintâ€|

—

****Nephew****

The Arbiter stalked slowly down the Cairo's hallways. He was not in the best of moods, having prior been practically run down by a group of Sangheili youths aboard the Veiled Shade as they fled the wrath of Grea 'Morgamouss after raiding her kitchen.

Frankly, as the greatest warrior among the Sangheili, nay the most potent warrior in the whole New Covenant with the possible exception of the Master Chief, he had no time for juveniles.

He was really hoping for some intelligent conversation, possibly if Miranda was off duty, or perhaps Taso was around somewhere, what, though he really didn't need wasâ€|

"Hey Assbiter."

The Arbiter winced, then turned, mandibles twisted in a forced smile. "Good day Demon, civil as ever I see."

"Sorry Arbiter, but the name just stuck with me." The Master Chief managed to sound the blatant opposite of 'sorry.' "What are you doing here anyway?"

"Searching for a means to expel pent-up aggression." The Arbiter shrugged. "Though I believe a warm meal would do just fine."

The Chief reached up and clapped a hand on the Arbiter's massive shoulder, "I'll take you to the canteen."

"Much appreciated."

When the two war-heroes arrived, the canteen was packed. Soldiers beginning their lunch-break, or ending it, Covenant warriors taking an interest in human cuisine, troops playing cards and losing a worrying amount of money to a smug-looking Grunt.

The Master Chief motioned the Arbiter inside, "what do you feel like?"

"Anything without legs, I'm in a worms mood today." The Arbiter smirked.

"Okayâ€|" The Spartan glanced around in case any Sangheili cooks were visible.

"Failing that, anything with high meat content will do." The Arbiter amended.

"Fine I'll just go andâ€|" The Chief was cut off by a familiar voice.

"Hey Chief. Arbiter."

"Johnson," both warriors turned. "To what do we owe this?"

"Hey fella's," for once Johnson was without his trademark cigar, "I'd like to introduce you to my nephew." The Arbiter and the Chief lowered their gaze to a small child, maybe seven or eight, standing beside Johnson. "This is Abe Thomson, Abe, meet the Arbiter and the Master Chief."

"Wow! Are you really the Master Chief?" Thomson gabbled excitedly. "I heard you killed a million aliens!"

"We had to evacuate the poor kid's town due to residual radiation from a nearby Covenant bombing sight." Johnson ruffled the boy's hair. "He's hanging out with me while his parents check on his grandmother."

"Covenant bombing, hmmm?" The Arbiter sighed. "I hope I didn't have anything to do with that."

Thomson glanced at the Arbiter, then turned to the Chief, then the Arbiter again, then looked up at Johnson. "Who's the squid-face?" He said in an overloud whisper.

"I see you've taught him all you know." Said the Arbiter dryly.

"Aw, come on Arbiter, the little scamp just picks up what he hears." Johnson glanced over his shoulder. "Hey guys, I just need to see Sergeant Belle about something, think you could watch the kid?"

"I imagine we could teach the whelp one or two things. Like respect for his elders." The Arbiter snapped.

"Great, you two're getting on already." Johnson lightly shoved the boy forward then hurried away. "I'll be back in, uh, well give me a minute."

"Take two, please." The Arbiter sighed as Johnson hurried off. He glanced down at the boy. "Well, child. Now that the 'man of a thousand insults' has departed, allow me to introduce myself, I am the Arbiter, the blade of the Covenant and the holy warrior of the Sangheili."

Thomson just gave him a blank look.

Then he turned to the Chief. "Did you really kill a thousand Covenant bastards with your bare hands?"

"A pity that he appears to lack basic vision, for I am still in the vicinity." The Arbiter growled as he turned and stomped away towards an empty table.

The Master Chief glanced down at the child by his side. "I did kill a few Covenant with my bare hands. But I prefer using an SMG."

"Cool." The kid bounced up and down on the balls of his feet excitedly. "I bet you could beat the Arbiter too huh?"

"Probably." The Spartan led the child towards the table the fuming Arbiter was seated at.

"I think not." The Sangheili muttered.

"The Elite's aren't very tough." Said Thomson in a carrying voice. "I bet we could've beat them easy."

"If humanity wasn't horrendously outnumbered, possibly." The Arbiter smirked.

"With the Chief on our side you guys couldn't do anything." Sneered the child. "And you're ugly."

"Is the boy going to continue his tirade or do I have to teach him the value of silence?"

"_And_ he talks funny."

"I'm actually starting to like this kid." The Chief smirked.

"Can I have your helmet?" Thomson piped up.

"It's standard issue for Spartans." The Chief growled. "Advanced and extremely expensive technology. So, no."

"Please?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Oh go on Demon." The Arbiter's mandibles twitched. "I thought you liked him."

"I like Cortana too, but that doesn't mean I'm going to give her my standard-issue gloves. Erâ€¦" The Chief realized he might have said something out of context as the Arbiter and Thompson gazed at him in quizzical interest. "That wasn't supposed to come outâ€¦ like it didâ€¦" He groaned and sat down heavily. "I hope Johnson gets back here soonâ€¦"

"Ah, Demon?" The Arbiter ground his mandibles together in an annoyed fashion. "But what does it mean when the larger of the two hands upon the clock face completes a full circle?"

"It's an hour." The Chief groaned, burying his face in his hands. "I'm starting to think Johnson isn't even coming back."

"I'm bored." Thomson grumbled. "Can I go and shoot something?"

"For the tenth time no!" The Chief snapped.

"Johnson lets me shoot stuff." Thompson pouted sullenly. "Can I have something to eat?"

"I agree with the child." The Arbiter snapped his fingers. "Time for vital sustenance I believe."

"Right, whatever, anything to stem the tide of excitement." The Chief climbed to his feet. "I'll pick something up." He set off towards the canteen, Thompson hurrying along after him.

The Arbiter watched them go and sighed. "I am beginning to believe Johnson does not intend to come back."

He drummed his claws on the table as he watched the clock hands slowly tick round.

Eventually he heard the familiar heavy footsteps that signaled the return of the Master Chief.

"Right, I wasn't too sure what you'd want so I got us a couple of beef pies."

"Thank you demon." The Arbiter peered past the heavily armored soldier. "Where is the boy?"

"The what?" The Chief sounded perplexed.

"The child called Thompson that you were taking with you to the

kitchen." Said the Arbiter patiently.

"I got himâ€¦ I think it's some kind of cake." The Spartan frowned behind his helmet. "What do you mean 'taking with me?'"

"The boy followed you." Said the Arbiter pointedly. "I assumed you knew."

"No." The Chief turned and glanced over his shoulder. "Oh."

As one, both warriors bounded upright and thundered towards the kitchen.

Several minutes of searching (methodical, not frantic, both being highly trained soldiers) revealed there to be no child.

"Right, any idea where a small boy could get to in less than a minute." The Arbiter leant on the countertop near the main kitchen, grinding his mandibles together in thought.

"Do you mind?" Snapped a petulant voice near his elbow.

The Arbiter twisted his head around, noting the cafeteria worker standing behind him, filling up a self-serve sugar bowl.

"My apologies." The Arbiter straightened.

"Yeah, whatever." The man frowned. "Do you aliens ever have seem to have bowls that just empty themselves."

"I fear I don't understandâ€¦"

"Well, I swear I just filled this ten minutes ago, I come back now and it's empty." The man shrugged and stalked off. "Explain the sense in that."

The Master Chief glanced at the Arbiter, meeting the Sangheili's worried frown. "I fear our problems have escalated somewhat."

"What do you think Arbiter? Find the kid? Or tell Johnson we never saw him before?"

"There is no honor in abandoning a child."

"I thought you'd say something like that."

The Arbiter sniffed the sugar bowl. "Many smells. I fear I cannot discern the boy'sâ€¦ unique odor."

"There's only one way he could have gone." The Chief set off towards the main doors. "There's two of us and we know where we're going. We'll catch him."

"I never thought I'd miss having Kig-Yar around, but this moment reveals it." The Arbiter had his head near the ground, while attempting to discern the rogue boy's scent amidst those adorning the

metallic surface. "Too many have walked this way, but a certain scent leads that way." He pointed.

"You certain?"

"The boy holds many smells about his person, it is only this that allows his trail to be marked so."

"Then come on." The Chief set off, the Arbiter standing to follow.

"Many times have I despaired at the absurdity of the young." The Arbiter glanced around the halls, noting various sticky fingerprints adorning the metallic surfaces. "Even Unggoy hold about them some behavioral restraint."

They walked on in silence for several minutes, earning various odd looks from any marines they passed.

They even passed several Covenant, aboard the Cairo for diplomatic reasons.

The Arbiter nodded to a nearby Sangheili Major, then turned to stare back down the hall.

"Oh no!" He and Chief halted where three Grunts were arguing in gibbering, high-pitched voices.

"Problems brothers?" The Arbiter prompted the Unggoy.

"Yeep!" Two of the tiny aliens leapt back, terrified, but the third, a Grunt Ultra, glowered.

"Me had believed we safe from human attacks." The bolder one squeaked indignantly. "Me was ran down by something small and sticky just now."

"A little boy full of intriguing smells?"

"Yes!"

"Oh, my apologies Captain Knoitt, I shall see about apprehending him at once."

"Yes!" The Grunt's anger seemed to decrease as the enormity of snapping at the Arbiter finally hit him. "Mighty one. You have harder job of that, hall go in two ways further on."

"I see, we may need to split up."

"Boy moving very fast Excellency." Said Knoitt doubtfully.

"Then we shall do so quickly."

The Arbiter's hooves made a thunderous ringing on the metallic floor as he darted down 'hall number one.'

His legs swung in the gait of someone who could run quickly and do so all day in need be.

Unfortunately he didn't see the group of Lekgolo around the corner until he was right on top of them.

If it had been anything else he would have smelt them long before reaching them, but the rankness of humans permeating the halls easily overpowered the faint musty, sweet smell of the Hunters.

The Arbiter's body reacted long before his mind did, and he dived, curling into a ball and rolling under the massive shield-arm of the nearest Hunter, his momentum carrying him straight into a wall.

The Arbiter gazed around dazedly at the blurry blue and orange shapes.

One of them lumbered over, keening softly in confusion at the Sangheili's actions.

"_Are you alright Excellency?"_ A large claw grasped the Arbiter's collar as the sibilant voices cut straight through his consciousness.

> "Behâ€|" The Arbiter groaned as he was hauled roughly to his feet.<p>

As his vision cleared up, he first thought he was seeing double, then realized that there were, in fact, two Hunters staring at him.

He found his gaze drawn to the spines he'd very nearly impaled himself on.

"Mehâ€|"

"_Apologies, Excellency."_ The Arbiter couldn't help a small shudder.

The trait he found most disturbing about the Lekgolo, aside from their razor-sharp spines, powerful fuel rod guns, and muscular arms that could snap an Elite's spine with ease, were the voices.

The Hunter's hissing, whispery tones were bad enough, but the way both 'brothers' spoke as one made it all the worse.

"_You are in good health?"_

"Yes," the Arbiter murmured, "yes, thank you."

"_You must take more care."_

"Indeed." The Arbiter brushed down his armor. "Uhâ€|" He eyed the brothers. "You haven't seen a human child around have you?"

The two glanced at one another.

"_One did pass this way, yes."_ They conceded.

"Ahâ€|" The Arbiter eyed their spines again. "The child didâ€|" make it out the other side?"

"_What?!?"_ The Lekgolo hissed angrily. _"You dare impugn our
circumspection? No whelp, human or otherwise would be denied passage
amid our ranks. You speak out of turn 'Arbiter.'"_

"Apologies." The Arbiter held up his hands defensively. "I didn't
mean any offense. Thank you brothers, I shall not use up any more of
your time."

The Lekgolo bowed their heads. _"Of course Arbiter. Good
luck."_

The Master Chief strode to a halt at the end of 'hall number
two.'

It had been a long walk down an, almost, straight hallway. Gleaming,
spotless walls indicated that this was probably an area where very
few soldiers went.

The reason he had halted was because a large door blocked off the
end.

The Chief glanced down at two slumped figures on either side.

"Oh no."

Guard robots. The Chief almost despaired.

Huge chunky creatures, easily nine-foot in height when standing,
their arms were long and used for propulsion. Two block-like heads
with camera-lens eyes turned up to face the Chief as both guards
knuckled upright.

Various fruit stickers and graffiti covered their rusty hides as they
looked him up and down.

Guard robots, behind his helmet the Chief almost groaned, he hated
the blasted guard robots.

Cavemen, Cortana called them, not just for their hunched shapes but
also for the 'ancient' AI that controlled them.

If the Chief had a choice between having half-a-dozen of these
machines or a pistol to back him up against a horde of Brutes, he'd
take the pistol.

If worse came to worse he could at least throw it at
them.

'Identity, Spartan.' One of them clarified at last, in their slow,
monotonous voice, 'confirmed.'

Ah yes, basic programming was all that counted towards any form of
thought the things had.

They used to be used in battle, but they were so single-minded even
the Grunts could out-think them tactic-wise. Added to the fact that a

single hit from a plasma pistol could easily disable them meant the only thing they could feasibly be used for was something to hide behind.

Nowadays they just guarded certain areas people found necessary to have guarded.

They were basically warning signs. Huge, metal warning signs.

'The civilian bay is off-limits. You may not pass.'

The Chief sighed. Obviously their programming hadn't changed since the Spartan project began, back in the days when Dr. Halsey thought her soldiers needed to be kept segregated from the civilian populace to ensure they retained their cold, systematic ideals.

"Listen," The Chief tried reasoning. "There's someone in there I need to retrieve. Just let me pass."

'The civilian bay is off-limits. You may not pass.'

"Abort." The Chief attempted to activate one of the buzz word's used to override their orders. "Cancel. Stand down. Cancel mission. Stop."

'The civilian bay is off-limits. You may not pass.'

The Chief gritted his teeth.
"Rightâ€¦"

The Arbiter glanced around a corner.

There! A child was standing near viewing window, looking down at Earth.

Creeping softly, hooves making almost no noise, the boy never suspected a thing.

The Arbiter closed his claws on the child's shoulders and spun him around. "Alright child, you're fortunate you are not mine or I would teach you a whole new level of discipline."

He was suddenly aware of a large amount of attention focused on him.

He looked up, seeing the frightened eyes of a woman looking into his.

The Arbiter glanced back at the child.

All humans looked very similar to him, butâ€¦ well, the pigtails and dress should have alerted him earlier.

"Oh." He let go, backing off slightly as the woman screamed and clutched her daughter to her.

"Ahâ€¦ ohâ€¦" The Arbiter glanced around at the large number of

stares focussed on him. "Yesâ€¦ well, you see humans all look veryâ€¦ of course, I can explain my actionsâ€¦ thereâ€¦ yes, well so you see Iâ€¦" The Arbiter took a deep breath. "I can explain everything.

Several minutes later, as he dashed back down the hall, the Arbiter thanked the Forerunners that Sangheili had a great turn of speed in stressful situations.

Miranda Keyes sighed as she walked down one of the main halls of the Cairo.

She was tired of the antics of marines, rowdy, crude and in need of a battle to sort them out.

She decided that she might get on better in the civilian bay, perhaps her cousin was still on board somewhereâ€¦

She reached the main door and frowned.

Two smoking wrecks on either side sparked weakly as one metallic hand clasped vainly at the air.

"What theâ€¦?" Miranda clapped a hand to her mouth in shock.

Suddenly the door hissed open, and Master Chief strode out.

A small, sticky boy was dozing quietly in his arms.

The Chief glanced at Miranda. "Not a word, Commander. Not a word."

When the Chief entered the canteen, he saw the Arbiter sitting at his table, staring gloomily down at his untouched pie.

"It's gone cold." He sighed, as the Chief sat down, setting the boy down nearby.

"Found him." Said the Chief.

"Yes." The Arbiter murmured. "I fear I may have just declared war on the human race. Starting with the little ones."

"Good to here you weren't just wasting time." The Chief glanced down as the boy stirred slightly.

"Hey Chief. Arbiter."

"Johnson," both warriors turned, somewhat stiffly.

Johnson was looking smug as he wandered over to the two war heroes. "How's everything been going?"

The Arbiters claws struck down on the table so hard they dug four small holes in its surface. "Fine."

"The kid behave himself?" Johnson shook his nephew slightly by the shoulder. "Wake up kid." Thompson's eyes shot open.

"Uncle Johnson!"

"Have a good time?"

"Yeah, the Chief and the Covenant bastard were great." Thompson rubbed his eyes sleepily. "Can I see them again sometime?"

Johnson glanced at the two. "What do you fella's say?"

The Chief and the Arbiter glanced at one-another.

"What was it you were saying?" Mused the Chief. "About declaring warâ€|?"

"When on Earthâ€|" The Arbiter picked up his pie and smirked. "Close your eyes Johnson."

"Hey, hold on there Arbiter, what are youâ€|? No! Don'tâ€|! Mmmmmf!"

"Heh heh, hand me yours now Demon, firing second volley!"

Thompson pouted sulkily. "Can I have your helmet now?"

"No!"

9. Truth or Dare

_Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to either the Halo universe, or Red v.s. Blue.
>

_Exclainer: in my defence, everyone does it. _:)

****Truth or Dare****

Miranda Keyes stood before Lord Hood, straining to hold in a smirk that threatened to break out.

"So," Lord Hood frowned, "how many were involved did you say?"

"Thirty odd." Miranda bit her lip. "Give or take."

Hood sighed and ran a hand over his brow. "And how much damage was sustained."

"Nothing expensive." Miranda blinked.

Hood scrutinized her for a moment, then turned to the purple avatar of Cortana sprouting out of a console on his desk. "And what do you know of this?"

Cortana hung her head. "I apologize for my part, it wasn't intentional."

"Of course." Lord Hood steepled his fingers. "Nowâ€¦ what exactly happened."

Miranda permitted herself a small smile. "Well sir, the way I hear it went like thisâ€¦"

Light footsteps clattered down the long hallways of the Cairo.

Every so often the owner of the feet would add a skip to their movements, they were clearly excited about something.

The doors to the indoor mall of the Cairo hissed open as the figure entered.

Seated at a table in the main eatery, the Master Chief, John 117 in his civilian-wear, was hunched over a coffee.

He stared gloomily into the pale brown depths, attempting to fathom his current purpose for today. The lights made his pale skin gleam like a beacon, so it was only fitting that someone or something should happen upon him.

"Hi John," the perky voice made him sink only deeper into his stupor.

"Go away."

"Now that's not very nice." The sound of a chair scraping nearby made the Chief glance across at his new companion. He caught sight of the gleaming eyes and disarming smile of the giggly little girl from Maintenance.

"What do you want?" John growled.

"Nothing." She grinned innocently. "Well, nothing much. Truth or Dare."

"What?" John frowned.

"It's a simple question." The girl leaned back. "Truth or Dare. Pick one."

John glared at her. "If I do this will you leave me alone?"

"Sure."

"Truth then." John's brow furrowed. "Now what?"

"Simple," the girl idly ran her fingers through her hair. "I'll ask you something and you tell me the Truth. Alright?"

"Sounds simple."

"You'd be surprisedâ€|" She shrugged. "Apparently, mister Spartan, certain augmentations from the project left you with a reduced libido. Were this not the case, would you ever be inclined toâ€| except me as your girlfriend?" She cocked an eyebrow. "Hmm?"

John gave her an appraising look for a moment, then shook his head. "No. If ever I'd want to be attached to girl, she'd have to be considerably more mature than you. Not to mention more conservative," he added as an afterthought, glancing at the less-than fully done-up buttons of her military-issue shirt.

The girl pouted. "That's unfair."

"You wanted the Truth." John turned back to his coffee. "Now leave."

The girl nodded curtly and stood up. She whirled around in a gust of cheap perfume, then turned back with a mischievous smirk. She leant towards John and murmured. "This isn't over yet."

Then, with a last cheery wave she pranced away back down the hallway.

The giggly Maintenance girlâ€|

Many had tried describing her, and most agreed that Miranda Keyes had come closest.

She had stated once; that the girl was a composite of blond jokes culminated in the body of a prodigy brunette with little to no military regulation about her person.

She wore clothing of a size too small, and her hair, though tightly wound in a bun, was at full length, slightly past her shoulders.

She tended to be classed as an annoyance aboard the Cairo butâ€|

She was smart.

Not to say that she was the best mechanic on deck, not by a long shot, at only twenty years of age, and experience definitely came before intelligence. But among her other peers she outshined them all, having a startling knowledge of the inner workings of the human ships that even several of the older ones failed to grasp.

But the one thing no one seemed to realize was that underneath her airhead grin and innocent expression, there dwelt a stubborn bull-headedness that could rival even the Covenant Prophets at times.

Something made her pause as she pranced down one of the corridors.

A flickering light was seeping out through one of the main computer suites.

She wandered over and rapped her knuckles on the inner wall.

Three heads swung around to face her, then turned back to their work.

"_Rukan_ child," one muttered.

The girl coughed politely. "Anything I can help you with gentlemen? Cortana?"

The AI glowered, from her perch atop a console. "Unless you've had any practice in extracting rough constructs, can you leave, perhaps?"

The girl giggled, "well, as a matter of factâ€¦"

"Then please share your knowledge." One of the other figures unfolded itself from a chair, towering over her. She recognized the hulking frame and elaborate armor of the Arbiter.

"Sure, what's going on?"

Cortana folded her arms over her chest. "Turns out a couple of Covenant infiltrator AI's have been lying dormant in our system for a while. We're extracting them."

"By we, you refer to I." The third figure muttered.

He was another Sangheili, not clad in armor, but wearing a loose tunic and trousers, as well as a pair of belts, one around the waist and one over the chest. All of which were covered in pockets.

Some manner of forward-facing goggles covered his eyes as he surveyed the flickering computer screen before him. "Blasted things are buried deep, they raise many defences."

Cortana snapped her fingers. "Gone."

The Sangheili 'tech' clicked its mandibles in an annoyed fashion. "Indeed. I see nothing gets passed you. Prepare to upload."

Cortana nodded. "Ready."

"What are you doing here?" The maintenance girl pulled up a seat next to the Arbiter.

"I wasâ€¦ passing through. In fact I was on my way to see the Demon, we were going to have a bit of one-to-one close combat sparring. I want to if the biological upgrades are as potent as they are made out to be."

The girl nodded, then turned her attention to Cortana.

The AI's avatar was now surrounded in a swarming cloud of, what looked like, glittering flies.

Most were dark in color, but for two, that were a gleaming gold.

Cortana had her arms outstretched and her eyes closed.

For several seconds the swarm swirled around her, before the two gold ones settled, one in either hand.

Her fingers closed around the two rogue AI. "Got 'em."

"Right," the Sangheili tech placed a disk in the main drive. "Hand them over."

"Not yet." Cortana clenched her fingers and a swirl of colors surrounded her, before being absorbed into her body. "Can't have you knowing all our little secrets can I?" She smirked.

"Indeed no." Said the tech irritably, pulling out the disk. "I take my leave." He rose up, the top of his head not quite meeting the Arbiter's 'chin.'

"By-ee." The maintenance girl sniggered as he shouldered past.

As Cortana ran a systems check, the girl (_A/N: let's call her MG shall we?_) turned to the Arbiter. "Hey, mister Arbiterâ€|"

"Just Arbiter, thank you." He bowed his head.

"Arbiter," MG corrected herself, "truth or dare?"

The Arbiter blinked. "Pardon?"

"Truth," said MG calmly, "or dare. It's an Earth game."

The Arbiter smiled. "I hardly have much time for games nowadays. Not since I was a whelp."

"What's taking up said time at the moment?" MG cocked her head on one side.

"Uhâ€|" The Arbiter faltered, then shrugged. "Excellent point. State the rulings then."

MG leaned back. "Simple really, either tell me a Truth or do a Dare, your choice."

"Very well, dare then. What now?"

MG smiled and leant close to where she assumed his ear to be. "I need you toâ€|"

John 117 glanced up as heavy footsteps clanged across the floor towards him.

"Arbiter?" He frowned as the Sangheili warrior approached, looking shifty.

"Hail Demon." He nodded stiffly. "Erâ€|"

"What's wrong Arbiter?" John narrowed his eyes.

"Umâ€¦" The Arbiter ground his mandibles. "Truth or Dare Demon."

"What?" John's frown deepened.

The Arbiter sighed. "Truth, or Dare. The child dared me to tell you this. She said I was honor-bound to do so."

"By 'child' you mean a small girl with a tendency to giggle?"

"Indeed. This is so."

John groaned. "Truth then."

"Hey Chief." A nearby marine wandered over. "What did you just say?"

John snarled. "Nothing, go away."

The marine smirked. "I think I heard you say truth huh? Playing a game? Can I join?"

"No we're notâ€¦" John started, but a voice behind him interrupted.

"Yeah we are, sure you can play!" MG stood on her toes behind the Chief to wrap her arms around his shoulders, but failed miserably so simply entwined his waist, only for the irate Spartan to shove her off.

"So what's the Truth?" The marine turned to the Arbiter.

"I do not believe I have learned thus far." The Arbiter frowned. "I ask a question?"

"Yep." MG didn't dare look at John's face.

The Arbiter appeared thoughtful. "Have you Demon, in your apathetic state everâ€¦ felt _for _anyone?" He beamed proudly.

John glowered. "I haveâ€¦ feltâ€¦ hatred for the Covenant."

"Point well taken." The Arbiter blanched. "Any non-unpleasant feelings?" He offered timidly.

"Pity. For the victims of the Flood. Respect, for Johnson, Miranda, Lord Hood and Captain Keyes, and you up until this point. And Kellyâ€¦" John trailed off as he noticed a large number of eyes focussed on him. He rallied. "Kelly, Fredric, Linda and the rest of my comrades in the Spartan forces."

"Who's next?" Piped up MG perkily.

"Hey!" Everyone in the vicinity turned to a console in the mall. Bright violet and blue burst up, flaring into the shapely form of Cortana. Her hands were on her hips and an expression of anger flitted across her face. "One moment I'm running a system scan, next thing I know everyone disappears on me!" She scowled at MG and the

Arbiter.

"Whatâ€¦?" The Arbiter's brow furrowed, "what do mean? How would our being there improve anything once your scan was complete?"

Cortana opened her mouth to retort, then closed it and frowned.
"Uhâ€¦"

"I think you're getting needy." Quipped MG.

Cortana flared green angrily. "Quiet."

MG smirked. "Truth or Dare Cortana."

The violet avatar frowned. "You're seriously asking me this? Right now?" The girl nodded. Cortana folded her arms and cocked her head on one side. "Dare." She challenged.

A mischievous smirk spread across MG's lips. "Cortana, I dare you to share a kiss with the Master Chief." As a shocked expression was shared between the two victims MG added, "on the lips."

"Impossible." Cortana snorted. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm a hologram."

"Does not this hologram have lips?" The Arbiter and the slowly gathering crowd of marines all turned to stare at the indignant AI.

A variety of colored flashed across Cortana's body and a small hourglass materialized in her chest as she thought this over. Eventually she reached a conclusion. "Chief, come here."

John glowered and sunk down in his chair. "No. You come over here."

"Chiefâ€¦" Cortana's voice dropped to a hiss as several marines started nudging each other and snickering. "I'm not going to order you. But I am suggesting. Very firmly. Now."

John sighed and hauled himself upright. As he strode over, Cortana expanded in size until her head was level with the Chief's. John halted and stood stiffly in front of the avatar, hands clamped firmly by his sides and his back to the watchers.

The Arbiter's mandibles twitched, he knew enough about human nature to tell that this was quite an important show of affection.

Cortana leaned forward, shimmering a faint pink and cupped his chin in her hand for the look of the thing. Various memory ports flared in being as she called to the motions into being. The Chief appeared as calm as ever, but his eyes were closed and Cortana couldn't help noticing his fists clench involuntarily.

Cortana's lips passed half a centimeter into the Chief's as her own eyes flickered shut, various formerly unused systems flared and died as a surge of unexplained concepts filled her head.

She pulled away.

As one, and if on cue, the marines broke into a series of wild cheers and whoops.

John turned and glared them into silence.

As he stalked back to his seat the Arbiter sniggered.

"Truth or Dare Assbiter!" Cortana snarled with more venom than she'd intended.

"Truth my fair avatar." The Arbiter inclined his head with a smile. "Ask away."

Cortana, slightly flustered at her brashness, stated, "among the members of the 'new Covenant' who do you dislike most?"

The Arbiter leant back, arms behind his head. "I suppose you'd imagine I'd say Johnson?" He quirked a brow ridge. "This is, of course, completely fabricated," he shook his head and chuckled. "I find his general demeanor most refreshing. No, the one with whom I am most at odds with is one you will not know. A cook for the barracks, name of Eva 'Embrax. She is a mostâ€¦ disagreeable beast. She has no respect for me, nor many others. She dislikes me for reasons I have, even now yet to fathom." He suddenly gave a start and leapt up as something collided with the back of his head.

He whirled around, snarling.

The only thing nearby was the pair of receding backs belonging to an Unggoy and a Sangheili.

The Unggoy had a simple methane backpack, rather than the 'fins' of the troops, although this was not evident at first glance, due to the massive number of folds of white material shrouding the tiny creature.

The Sangheili was female, this was clear from her grey-blue plume, and the loose, pale blue and food-spattered tunic and skirt. Over the front she had a light leather apron and one hand was draped over the handle of a hovering trolley. Several halo-shaped bangles adorned her arms.

"Apologies holy one." Her mandibles twitched with barely contained mirth as she turned one amber eye on the gathered individuals. "I was just passing."

"Liar." The Arbiter snapped. "You were observing us the whole time weren't you?"

"Perhapsâ€¦ a short while." She admitted.

"My friends." The Arbiter turned, his face twisting into a grimace. "This _is_ Eva 'Embrax. Just here to illustrate my point."

"Oh Arbiter I would never do that." Eva trilled. "I worship you with every fiber of my being."

"I don't like your tone." Growled the Arbiter icily.

"I was, actually," Eva pointedly ignored him, "delivering a selection of food to the Sangheili aboard this vessel. Though I suppose you could honor me enough to join this game of yours."

"I'd rather if you didn't."

Eva beamed. "Even better." She glanced down at the Unggoy near her feet. "Nami, please deliver this to the waiting gentlemen."

"Yes miss." Nami squeaked, taking hold of the bar and lowering the trolley to her level. "When can we expect you back at the kitchen?"

Eva vaulted into a chair. "Whenever."

"As usual then." Nami muttered, trudging away.

"Show me your game then." Eva leaned forward eagerly.

"We're not playing a game." John got to his feet.

"Master Chief, Truth or Dare!" Someone near the back of the crowd bellowed.

John scowled, searching for the face behind the voice. "Truth or Dare?"

"Aw come on ya sook!"

"Dare." John grunted.

Nothing happened for a moment, as all courage left the brazen individual.

Then MG coughed. "John, I dare you!"

"Oh no." The Spartan slumped down again.

"I dare you," MG repeated, pulling out a headset, "to phone up the number of my choice and leave a message on the answering machine."

John frowned as he took the headset. "What number?"

"555 8425." Said MG promptly. "The message you have to leave is, 'this is Spartan 117, does anyone read me?'"

John cocked an eyebrow. "That's it?"

"That's it."

John sighed and typed in the number, "I was expecting worse."

MG smiled innocently.

Booeebeebeboop. John sighed as the phone beeped. 'Hey Dude, this is Vic,' John frowned at the upbeat voice, 'I'm not this vicini-yo right now so just leave a yodel at the bleep.'

Bleep!

"This is Spartan 117" John began, but another voice interrupted: computerized, female and just built to be annoying.

'You have reached the voicemail system. To leave a message; just wait for the tone. When finished with your message; please hang up. If unhappy with your message; press one after recording to delete. To leave a callback; press eight. To label your message as urgent; press two. To leave a second message; press one.'

"Alright, hurry up." John sighed.

'To choose your tone; press five.'

"Fine, whatever, just get it over with."

'To upload the users number to your phone; press four.'

"I already know the number. That's how I dialed!"

'To order the 6188X VoiceMail system for your own use; press nine.'

"I could think of twenty good reasons why I don't want that"

'Pour entendre ces options dans la pression française trois.'

"What?"

MG smiled at the others. "We'd probably better give him a minute alone. Let's continue."

Eva's head whipped round. "Truth or Dare."

MG looked taken aback. "Dare?"

"So it is indeed." Eva leaned back. "My dear girl, I've only been here a moment but I can already see an aspect of your clingyness. So in order to demonstrate I'd like you cling to the leg of one unfortunate until your next turn. Um not, of course, one who is already suffering," she cast a sideways glance at John, "other than that, your choice."

MG glanced around, "right." She stood up, then tumbled forward, catching her arms around the ankle of a marine. "Sorry Private O'Riley."

"Uh" The Private blinked. "S' okay."

'If today is black Friday,' chirped John's headset, 'please press thirteen now.'

"What thirteen! The numbers only go up to nine!"

'To order more numbers; please press zero now.'

"Ah" Truth or Dare, Mister O'Riley." Said the Arbiter hesitantly.

"Dare." O'Riley shrugged.

"Run, walk, limp or use the favored product of your locomotion to one end of the mall and back."

"No problem." O'Riley slunk off, dragging MG along after him.

"I'll get you for this Arbiter!" She snarled over her shoulder.

The Arbiter closed his eyes, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mandibles. As he did so though, he couldn't help noticing voices near the back of the crowd: 'Hey Jess, truth or dare!' 'Sergeant Samson, I dare you toâ€¦' 'Uhâ€¦ Truth?'

His eyes shot open, noting one unfortunate Sangheili caught up in the madness. "It appears Demon, that the child has brought about a certain crowd reaction."

'To connect to a different server; press four now.'

"You've already used four!"

'To upload the users number to your phone; press four.'

"Gaaah!"

"Ah, I see you are busy." The Arbiter turned and caught Eva's eye. "Oh, young 'Embrax, Truth or Dare."

"You've already taken a turn." Said Eva sullenly.

"I'm taking another."

"Truth then." Eva's eyes flashed.

The Arbiter leant back, entwining his fingers. "Recent stock check's of our inventory has revealed one set of Sangheili minor armor unaccounted for. During our civil war with the Brutes were you, perhaps, involved in a military sense? Possibly fighting alongside the troops?"

Eva glanced away, pursing her mandibles. Finally, after almost a minute of thought, she murmured. "Yes."

"Ha! I knew it!" Said the Arbiter triumphantly. "Is this suit currently hidden within the confines of your quarters?"

Eva smiled brightly. "One question at a time Arbiter."

The Arbiter snorted. "Wellâ€¦ fine. I suppose it explains the reason for your ideas above your station."

Eva's expression snapped from cheerful to severe. "My what?"

"Oh, nothing."

'To realign the corporal recrudescens of your current spectrum; press three-cubed.'

"That doesn't even make any senseâ€|"

'If reality is fractured; please hang up."

From her console on the outskirts of the group, Cortana glanced around at the turmoil as more than one fight began to break out, not least the currently escalating argument between Eva and the Arbiter. "Soâ€| I'd better see toâ€| the MAC gunâ€| okay." She shimmered out.

"My station?" Eva was on her feet, leering down at the Arbiter. "_My_ station? Do we want to talk about stations here Arbiter? So-called blade of the Prophets."

"I was only sayingâ€|" The Arbiter rose to his feet, but still found he was forced to crane up slightly, Eva actually being several inches taller. "Well, that youâ€| clearlyâ€|"

"What, exactly?" Eva's eyes narrowed.

"Ahâ€| erâ€|"

Footsteps rang out across the mall, accompanied by a fierce cursing as Private O'Riley trudged back.

He glanced around as a harassed Captain struggled to contain a brawl centered around a group of Privates and a possible false Truth.

Elsewhere a Sangheili dangled one unfortunate upside down by his ankles while explaining the finer points of honor with regards to challenges.

He frowned, shook off the maintenance girl and wandered away in search of a drink.

Despite lying on the ground with a rip in her shirt and two bruised knees, she couldn't help a small smirk. "Well, I think that went pretty well actually."

BLEEP!

"ThisisSpartan117cananyonereadme!" John ripped off the headset and snapped it in two. He heaved himself to his feet and stalked away between Eva and the Arbiter. "I hate answering machines."

Miranda leaned back. "Fortunately the Master Chief had the presence of mind to press the fire alarm. Though even the gallons of water did seem to diffuse the Arbiter. From what I hear several Elite Councilors had to get involved. They're still debating who was in the wrong I believe."

Lord Hood sighed. "Has anyone told Johnson about it yet?"

"Not yet."

"How fortunate."

"Sadly this has frayed tempers somewhat between certain Sangheili and the UNSC." Cortana shook her head. "And you know how things can escalate. This isn't something we can just whitewash over sir."

"I'll go and give the troops a dressing down," Miranda got to her feet and went over to the door. She paused in the entrance. "Oh, Lord Hood?"

"Yes?"

"Truth or Dare." Miranda's smirk lingered even after the door hissed closed after her

10. Banquet

In a pitch-black room...

A door opens...

The Arbiter strides in, pushing what looks like a gurney, upon-which a gagged figure in a straightjacket is apparently strapped.

He looks up, "good day, my associates of the Halo universe and I would like to offer our most sincere apologies over the tardiness of this chapter. It has, for hitherto unexplained reasons, driven nevar88 completely insane. Fear not though, for by the time you have finished reading it I will have ensured his return to sanity. Thank you for your time, try the Mildworms."

He bows, and departs, pushing his gibbering ward along with him.

_----- _

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

****Banquet****

"By the Rings if I have to listen to the grievances of another Councilor I swear I'm going toâ€¦!"

"I'd try not to slander their names too readily Rtas. The Councilor's are not known for their patience."

Rtas 'Vadumee, also known to his brethren as Commander Half-Jaw, halted and glowered at his companion. "Arbiter, you have no idea of the trials I have faced over the course of the last seven rotations. The amount of times I've listened to them complainâ€¦! raagh!" He snarled and clenched his fist. "Like whelps squabbling over a ripe Yanta!"

"Whelps indeed?" The Arbiter mused. "Are you aware, perhaps, of the term

'sending-the-Arbiter-in-to-train-the-new-recruits-because-we-can't-be-bothered?' It has become a major aspect of my life of late."

"Oh really?" Rtas snorted. "So broadening the minds of a group of impressionable youths is difficult, hmm?"

"It is if Eva comes in with their rations and tells them that touching the Arbiter's armor is good luck." The Arbiter groaned. "One can only take so many little sticky marks."

"Try replacing 'sticky marks' with snide comments. Then add the High Councilor and stir briskly!" Rtas shuddered. "Apparently the Rukan's so-called 'United Earth Federation Prime Minister,' has refused point-blank to leave his planet. The Councilors were on the verge of declaring war again over the idea of humans shunning our hospitality."

"Ah yes, well try!" Both warriors suddenly leapt aside as Grea 'Morgamouss trundled past, pushing along a colossal hovering trolley.

"Uh! well met Mistress!" The Arbiter called after her.

Grea grunted non-committedly.

The two Sangheili watched her receding back. Lesser Elites, with not nearly as good reflexes, had been near crushed by the unstoppable death machine that was Grea and her trolley.

Brutes used to dive out of the way as she passed, even Hunters gave her a wide berth.

Rtas frowned. "She seemed buoyed by bit more purpose today than usual, she doesn't normally miss out on the chance to sneer at least a small remark at me."

"There is no particular feast or such today is there?" The Arbiter quirked a brow ridge.

"Not that I!" Rtas gave a start, "oh by the Forerunners I'd clear forgot, apologies Arbiter but I must retreat. My diligence is required elsewhere, farewell." He turned and clattered away in the same direction Grea went.

"What!?" The Arbiter cocked his head on one side. "Did I just miss something?"

"It takes balance, accuracy and agility to become proficient, and a certain amount of brutality is required, so expect no leniency from me." Zealot Taso 'Ratanalee began circling the sparse room he currently occupied, holding his makeshift sword at ease. It had the basic handle of a Covenant energy sword, and two thick wires curving out of either side to make a makeshift blade.

His opponent, John 117, watched him warily.

Both were clad casually, John in a singlet and loose pants and Taso in a tunic and a long loincloth.

John smiled faintly, "ready whenever you are."

"Of course." Taso whirled around, viscously lunging as he blurred past, John struck the 'blade' aside with his own similar training weapon.

Taso twisted easily in mid-slash, delivering a stab to John's gut, which the Spartan struck aside.

Taso loosed a barrage of punishing sweeps, which John blocked as best he could, but received a blow to the chest for his troubles.

John backed away hastily as Taso started weaving back and forth. "Atrocious Demon, even a Sangheili Minor can duel better than you. How can you expect to wield our weapons if you can't even block a toy?"

John growled and lunged, aiming to raise a weal across Taso's chest, only for the young Zealot to glide back with two quick steps, evading the blow. With an easy step forward he aimed with decapitation in mind, only for John to whip up his arm with inhuman agility and catch the blow in mid-swing with barely a flinch of effort.

Taso grunted with surprise, "it would appear I underestimated your augmentations."

John pushed aside the sword as Taso backed away.

The Sangheili's mandibles twitched in amusement. "You Spartans always were more than you appeared."

Without warning he lunged, John stumbled back, the blade just grazing his cheek, and lashed out at Taso's blindside.

The Elite gave a snarl and staggered back, clutching his face. "Ahâ€¦ it's that thrice accursed eye againâ€¦!" Said eye managed to get dislodged by the blow, and rolled past John's leg to the door.

It stopped when a boot blocked its way.

Both warriors looked up past the leg and up the torso before settling on the displeased expression of Miranda Keyes.

"Are you two through messing about?"

"My fair Miranda." Taso bowed. "We are hardly messing nor about."

"That so?" Miranda picked up Taso's eye and buffed it on her sleeve before handing it over.

Taso reached out, but couldn't disguise the slight grimace of distaste that twisted his mandibles, clearly Miranda had breached some kind of etiquette. Taso spat on the tiny orb before inserting it back in his socket. "What do you wish of us, lady?"

"I need you two to come and help me move some tables in the cafeteria."

"Ah this would be for the, ah, to do this evening?"

"Yeah theâ€| the banquetâ€| thingâ€|" Miranda sighed.

Miranda started away down the hall as Taso and the Chief followed after. "It is of some interest to me," Taso cracked a weak smile, "that it seems for every important event it is your ship that harbors us all. Some discomfort, perhaps?"

Miranda stiffened slightly but kept walking. "Earth isn't quite ready for that step yet."

"So I gather in fact, that despite the constant ferrying of our Councilors back and forth, the only human delegate to set foot on Sangheili thus far, has been you."

"Wellâ€|" Miranda shrugged. "Lord Hood doesn't even really like setting foot on Earth, he says it doesn't feel like home compared to the Cairo."

"And yourâ€| Prime Minister?"

"Ahâ€| thatâ€|"

"Fear not," Taso clapped a massive claw on her shoulder as they neared the cafeteria and accelerated past. "I understand, what human would willingly trust the alien monsters?" With a wry smirk he left the fuming Commander by the door.

John sidled in past her, glancing around at the work already being undertaken.

He looked on, bemused, as two Grunts waddled past, seemingly unburdened by the table they hoisted over their heads, a move that wasn't matched by the large amount of marines attempting to assemble the furniture.

"We're trying to ensure there's a maximum amount of seating in a minimum amount of space." Miranda ushered him forwards. "Hurry up about it and you'll be finished in no time."

"Right."

He glanced at Taso, who was showing off in the manner of a self-conscious person attempting not to draw attention to themselves while lifting a table single-handed with no apparent effort.

John's gaze filtered through the room

It had, so far managed to reach a semblance of order, lined up in rows with three tables at one end of the room to serve as a master table for the resident Commanders and Councilors.

John shot Taso a look, a slight smirk quirking the corners of his mouth. "Reckonâ€| we could get things sorted quicker then this rabble?"

"With my arm tied to my foot and half my face in a bowl of Mildworms." Taso smirked. "Means yes."

"Hmmm." The Arbiter of the Covenant paused in the hallway of the 'Veiled Shade,' currently in orbit around Earth.

He pressed the side of his face against a nearby doorway.

He winced as a barrage of vibrations assailed him. Something crashed against the nearby wall and sent the Arbiter's teeth rattling. "What on Sangheili?"

The door hissed open and Nami the Unggoy ambled past, muttering under her breath and not even glancing at the Elite.

With a raised brow-ridge, the Arbiter straightened and carefully peered into the room beyond.

He had to duck back briefly as something glass and possibly expensive shattered near his nose. "What the Flood's going on in here?"

"Oh great, as if we didn't have enough trouble." The Arbiter winced at the venomous sneer.

Through the doorway was a warzone.

A kitchen in turmoil, as terrified young Sangheili and Unggoy scurried around bubbling vats, smoking ovens and trays loaded down with strange crunchy things.

And hunched in the center like a deranged, predatory animal was Eva 'Embrax.

Clenched in one of her spidery fists was a long fork-like abject, though she was brandishing it like a saber. "Back to work." She hissed as several of the Sangheili turned to glance at the newcomer.

They hurriedly turned back.

Eva shot the Arbiter a glare, then strode off to one side of the room, rearing up behind a terrified Sangheili girl, clearly not up to the daily stresses of home cooking.

"We have minimal time and after Faela 'Teineyr collapsed from exhaustion we are sorely understaffed." Eva used the fork to turn over some kind of creature resembling a bloated cockroach. "The feast is tonight, have you no idea how to hurry?! Who taught you how to cook?"

"The same person as you Mistress." Muttered one.

"That's it!"

The Arbiter made to intervene, when a flicker of movement caught his attention.

"What on Sangheili? Esi?"

Barely a few meters away a slim Sangheili with a grey plume was

struggling with a massive pot filled with some kind of sludgy black mixture.

Her eyes lit up in surprise, then delight.

"I don't believe it." She stumbled over, beaming. "Well, if it isn't the Arbiter, I had no idea. What are you doing here?"

"Justâ€¦ wandering what's going onâ€¦"

"Oh that," Esi shrugged, resting the bottom of the pot against her hip. "There is aâ€¦ feast or something this evening."

"And I wasn't told, whyâ€¦?"

"Everyone's been busy Arbiter, I imagine they intended to alert you soon. As I understand it it's due to be pretty big, as many human and Covenant as are available should be there."

"Ah," the Arbiter looked her up and down. Esi had filled out a lot since he'd last seen her, her ribs didn't stick out from her flanks anymore and her scales were less dull and no longer looked like they'd scatter in high winds. "So what are you doing here?"

Esi smiled again, "feeling indebted to you Arbiter. Your visit wasâ€¦ encouraging to say the least, I mean, who else can say the Arbiter came to apologize to them? With chocolates." She gave a high-pitched, self-conscious giggle. "We truly are living in amazing new times, so I thought to myself, that there was no reason to remain smoldering in my cesspit of a life, so I sought out some help. Uhâ€¦ Eva 'Embrax was a former roommate of mine during tutorage in my youth, and she said she knew youâ€¦ in fact she seemed more than keen to take me on when I told her what you'd told me."

"Well," the Arbiter snorted, watching Eva browbeat a couple of terrified Unggoy, "Eva seems awfully busy. What's the occasion? Did she leave everything to the last minute?"

"No, you see Arbiter," Esi cackled, "her greatness, Grea 'Morgamouss, chef supreme, saw fit to allow her young ward Eva to prepare the appetizers and other such dishes, and Eva of course, took to this with the prideful will of all we Sangheili, and has taken it upon herself to outdo her mistress."

"Oh?" The Arbiter's mandibles twitched, "do you think she stands a chance?"

"Truthfully? Not a Jackal's chance in the Flood pits," Esi looked up and met the Arbiter's eye. She glanced away shyly, skin tinting a bashful purple. "I feel I should treat you to dinner sometime."

"Perhapsâ€¦" The Arbiter eyed the strange dark-grey mass in the pot she was carrying.

"Oh, this?" Esi laughed. "Grunt fodder, I was just preparing the first half in here then I have to add the final ingredientsâ€¦ umâ€¦ far away. Or else the smell tends to drown out the room and taint all the food."

"You know, in all of my campaigns, regardless of the threat of starvation, I have never brought myself to taste theâ€¦ Unggoy rations."

"And you should not if you wish your tastebuds to remain intact." Murmured Esi darkly.

"Another means to keep your tastebuds," the Arbiter gave a start of shock as a claw reached up under his mandibles and caught the end of his tongue, dragging it partway out of his mouth, "is to exit this place immediately."

"Tha'th motht dithrethpectful!" The Arbiter spat, eye swiveling around to see Eva grasping his tongue, her face like the wrath of the Forerunners.

"Care to challenge me?"

"Not for all the canapÃ©th in the univerthe." Esi looked down, then glanced away, embarrassed at the pool of saliva beginning to form around the Arbiter's hooves.

"Good." Eva breathed, "Esi, back to work, Arbiter, with respect, get out of my kitchen."

Compared to the madness of Eva's kitchen, the room housed by Grea was a relative sea of calm.

All Sangheili and Unggoy knew where they stood with Grea, often on the receiving end of a severe drubbing.

All kitchen-staff were, therefore, more than free to talk, laugh and generally do anything Eva would throttle them for. Provided they worked.

Rapping against one stocky thigh was the end of a thick cylinder of wood, the other end clutched in her powerful fingers. Often it was the last thing for new recruits to the Sangheili barracks, intent on raiding her kitchen, to see before waking up next to a stack of unwashed cutlery and the thunderous expression of the hulking matron.

Several knives hung around the walls, mounted for display, stained with Jiralhanae blood, an exhibition of Grea's part in the civil war.

Due to her intense regime and careful forethought, Grea was almost finished with her part of the feast, and thus many of her staff were already over at Eva's. The place, though, had managed to fill up, and an impromptu meeting was being held.

"Right, run through this with me again," a lesser Elite Councilor was leaning against a kitchen counter, looking bemused, "we areâ€¦ sitting with Unggoy?"

"It's not complicated." Zealot, Taso 'Ratanalee sighed and let out an

exasperated snort, "this whole thing is a celebration of equalityâ€|"

"Yes butâ€| with Unggoy?"

"The Unggoy Councilors, yes."

"I thought they were just for show."

"And it is a very good show to be seen with them."

"Butâ€|" The Councilor snorted, "do I have to talk to them?"

"Yes." Taso glowered, "you have been off the battlefield for far too long."

"Moving onâ€|" One of the other Councilor's sighed.

"Right, Johnson has voiced his regrets over the human's lack ofâ€|" Taso began.

"Hey, I haven't _voiced_ anything squid-face, I'm not a pansy." Standing offside with his arms crossed, Johnson scowled passed the fug of cigar smoke swirling around his head. "All I said is we don't have enough food to fling around you lot."

"Yes, the human rations seem to be limited byâ€|"

Johnson blew out a swirl of smog. "All them aliens dropping bombs on our planet messed up our stocks. Still, your grub's not too bad for a handful of bugs."

"Thank you."

"This will hardly be a problem." Said one of the Councilors pointedly. "Bring enough for your people, I'm sure none of ours could stand your meager foodstuffs anyway. We will be more than glad to share our bounty."

"Just bring some of those squishy green things and I won't have to hurt anyone."

"Agreed."

"And the oozing purple things, they're good to."

"That is our culinary discussion I believe," Taso smiled, "what officials intend to attend? Any of the lay community, I mean?"

"Nah, all them kids are off arguing with your bosses." Interjected Johnson. "But Hood, me, Miranda and some other important guy's will be there."

"Do we disperse ourselves among the lesser troops to show willing then?" Offered Taso.

"Are you mad 'Ratanalee? Or has your eye rolled back into your brain?" One of the Councilors gaped. "I supped with a group of Major's once, and merely removed my headdress for a small time to ahâ€| observe nature's call. I later found, during a meeting with the

Hierarch's no less, that they'd inscribed a phrase on my crown. And they were _Major's_. This is not an experience I wish to repeat."

"What kind of phrase?" Johnson asked, an interested smirk creeping over his face.

"Uhâ€¦" The Elite blanched. "It roughly translated toâ€¦ Iâ€¦ ahâ€¦ 'I hunger for Jiralhane fecal matter.'" He glowered. "STOP LAUGHING AT ME!"

"Sorry squid-face," Johnson chuckled. "It's just I've never felt closer to you bastards then right now." He rapped the Councilor on the shoulder with his knuckle. "You're alright ya know."

"Do that again," the Councilor hissed through his teeth, "and I will bite off your hand."

"Right, so Command table it is." Taso scratched his nose with one claw, "with the option for possible embarrassment. Who among our laymen intend to join in the festivities?"

"I shall be there." Quavered a cracked voice from about chest height. All heads turned to focus on a hunched figure in hovering chair.

Though not as elaborate as a Prophet's throne, it served a similar purpose, mainly to house the shriveled figure of an elderly Elite.

Dry scales crackled as he twisted his head around slowly, misty eyes surveying the group and he wrapped the blanket that shrouded his shoulders closer around himself. "I wouldn't miss it for anything, I like a good feast as much as the next Sangheili." Though frail, his voice still held bass overtones.

Taso beamed, "of course." He glanced at the others, "Ah, Johnson and company I would like to introduce you to Tenqa 'Daisommee, one of our oldest and most accomplished former Zealots."

Tenqa's cracked mandibles twitched, "and with age comes the knowledge that a free meal is never to be scoffed at. Also," he added with a wink, "a certain large, shapely source has informed me we will play host to representatives from the, ah, Coven."

"Oh dearâ€¦" Taso buried his face in one hand. "Then I will be sure to inform the troops to be on their best behavior. That includes you Johnson."

"Who are theâ€¦?" One of the Sergeants accompanying Johnson started, but a Councilor waved him into silence.

"Not a matter for you to worry about. Tenqa, we look forward to your visitation. This unofficial meeting is, I believe, adjourned."

With general murmured of assent, the group split up and left.

When the door had hissed shut behind them, Tenqa swung his throne around to face the massive spine of Grea 'Morgamouss, and put on his most innocent expression. "Any chance of a sample before the

banquet?"

Grea chuckled throatily. "I intend to allow those that turn up the honor of enjoying the vast expenditure of effort my finest chefs and I were able to muster." She smirked over her burly shoulder. "That is to say, 'get stuffed.'"

"Fascinating Sister, it would seem things are about to proceed."

"Great, I want to get a seat before the frenzy begins."

"The bottomless gullets are soon to be satiated."

The cafeteria door hissed open, allowing two veiled figures to enter.

Long black robes rustled as they crept into the dimly lit room, one was verging on nine-foot-tall while the other was about a couple of feet shorter.

"They haven't set the food out yet." Noted the shorter figure, a tone of despondency in her voice, "how sad."

"Mmm." The taller huffed. "Over there." She pointed to a bench up against a corner of the room. "I will be seated, join me when you may."

She stalked away, then halted as the top of her veil brushed against something. "What on Sangheilâ€|?" She pulled a large orb down from the roof and regarded it coldly. "Rubber and air, what wretched contraption is this?" She popped the balloon with a claw then burst several more nearby before striding away to her seat.

"Always a pleasure Elsa." The other called, smirking behind her veil, "I'll remember to notify the authorities of your arrival. And the army."

"I never liked the idea of having a noose around my neck."

"Oh be quiet, it looks good on you."

"Like a snake tryin to disembowel your chin."

"Shut up Johnson."

"It's choking me."

"Shut up Chief."

"I feel awkward."

"Shut up Arbiterâ€| with respect."

"Thank you."

"I've always enjoyed a good meal, it keeps the Grunts quiet."

"Quite."

"And slightly stinky."

"Once again, quite."

The doors of the cafeteria hissed open as five figures strode in.

Miranda and Johnson, both in naval whites, marched alongside the Master Chief, squeezed into a green dress shirt and pants and someone either extremely brave or extremely foolish had managed to slip a tie around his neck. Nearby the Arbiter, resplendent in gleaming armor marched alongside Rtas 'Vadumee in his white dress-armor.

Already the place was crowded, but if the theme was camaraderie then the planner had failed miserably.

Sangheili sat apart from Unggoy, seated far away from humans and the Lekgolo weren't even in the room.

"Well, this has gone belly-up pretty quickly." Miranda sighed. "I'll go and see the Sangheili Councilor's, at least they'll talk to me."

"I'm gonna go see if Sergeant Belle's doing that 'fork trick' of hers," Johnson snickered, sauntering away into a crowd of marines.

"Fascinating." The Arbiter scowled. "You exiting Half-Jaw?"

"I intend to encourage a bit of mingling with the Unggoy. The Grunt Councilors will thank me."

"I could do with seat away from the bustle, I like being a passive observer." The Arbiter smirked as Rtas stalked off. "You, Demon?"

"Good idea."

Both heroes lumbered towards a darker corner of the room.

"Not much of a banquet," quipped John, glancing down at the meager portions dotting the tables.

"Ah Demon, this is but the first appetizer," the Arbiter plucked a gleaming black wriggly thing out of a bowl and chucked it between his mandibles. "You can trust Grea is, aha, setting upâ€|" He motioned to a large screen covering a small part of the room. Quiet, yet busy sounds were emanating out from it.

"She will be very keen on impressing all of you," the Arbiter smirked. "This will be as much a feast for the eyes as for the stomachs."

"Arbiter?"

"Yes?"

"Do you ever worry that you might be a dork?"

"Eva! oh Eva!" Nami the Unggoy roughly shoved the slumbering Sangheili.

Eva was sprawled back in a chair, her hands clasped over her stomach and her head flung back with mandibles gaping.

She was making a noise that closely resembled either a) a person snoring heavily or b) a dying walrus screaming into a bullhorn.

She jerked awake with a start as she was jabbed at by Nami's claws. "Wha?" She croaked.

"You late Mistress!" Said Nami urgently.

"Wha?" Eva repeated, just in case Nami had missed it the first time.

"The banquet Mistress," Nami held up a long, flowing piece of red fabric. "You have to get dressed quick or you not make it."

"Ah." Eva agreed, staggering upright.

"You definitely not want to miss what Grea cooked up." Prattled Nami as Eva peeled off her apron. "You still have _long _way to go."

"Ah, but what could I suspect?" Eva struggled out of her robe, "perhaps next time."

"You still get beat." Nami passed Eva the gown, smirking behind her methane filter. "At least your food get served first."

"Then it shall be easily forgotten." Eva sighed, smoothing out the front of the dress and rearranging her bangles. "Well, all the best to her. At the very least someone'll like my canapés." She reached behind her back and pulled up a thin strip of material hanging near the top of her spine, pulling it up along the back of her neck and on the top of her head up to her nose. As she moved her head the rings attached along its edges jingled faintly. "Shall we move out?"

"Right."

When Eva and Nami blundered into the cafeteria, the starters she'd so painstakingly put together were already being taken apart by the ravenous crowd.

"Success." She chirped happily, before marching off into said crowd.

Elsewhere, the Arbiter leant forward and examined a portion of the human's own fare.

"So thisâ€|?" He twisted the rectangular object around in his fingers thoughtfully, "this isâ€| prepared by your chefs and packaged?" He frowned.

"No," John sighed, "prepared, packaged and thoroughly extracted of all flavor by a soulless company of robots." He took the item from the Arbiter, ripped open the package, broke off the end and handed it to him.

"Looks brown." Commented the Arbiter. He bit off a corner. "Tastes brown."

"Same color on exit." John concealed a belch.

The Arbiter screwed up his mandibles in distaste. "You disgust me sometimes."

"Everyone!" The deep, resonant tones of Grea 'Morgamouss echoed around the room. "May I request your attention."

Elsewhere, Eva buried her face in her hands, "oh Forerunners, noâ€|"

"It is a pleasure to entertain you all here." Grea beamed, stomping over to the curtained-off area. "Consider, if you would, the feasts of our ancestors, the most beautiful things I have ever laid eyes on, and it is with regret that I am not able to match such culinary talents. However," she grinned and grabbed a long silk rope, "I bloody well tried."

As the curtain fell away, many of the assembled let out an appreciative sigh.

The human part of it looked less impressed.

Multi-colored foodstuffs were piled high in wide gleaming bowls of tinted glass. Strange wiggling things writhed luminously among unmoving beetles with carapaces that gleamed like slicked oil.

Something scurried out of a bowl, and across the table towards the floor, before something bigger lunged out of its own dish and grabbed it in a pair of inch-long pincers before curling back up again.

There was only one thing on the table that the humans felt like sighing about.

A massive bowl sat in the center, filled with a sea of blue and green maggots, over which presided a large wire construct, covered in hundreds of glittering amber cubes in the perfect shape ofâ€|

"Haloâ€|" The Arbiter breathed, "even now, even knowing what they are

and what they do and what evil hides within the great rings still impress me."

"Whatever," John sighed. "I still think they're ugly."

"Each opinion is excepted." The Arbiter's massive hand shot out and grabbed the back of John's head, "I have no quarrels with your views," he slammed John face-first into the table, "and I appreciate your attitude to any and all of our beliefs. Never say that again."

John sat up, spitting out a mouthful of oats. "I can see I may have earned that." He stood up. "No offence to my planet, but I'd prefer to get a plateful of grubs then put up with these tasteless bars anymore."

John carefully inched himself through a gaggle of Grunts, and wandered along the table.

He sighed, eyeing the worms and beetles with distaste, until he dislodged a rock-like oat from between his teeth, and happily scooped up a plateful of, what Johnson would call, 'good homestyle cooking by the alien bastards.'

Suddenly an elbow swung out of nowhere, knocking the air briefly out of John's lungs.

As he doubled over partially, a black-clad Sangheili forced her way past him.

An already heaped tray was clutched in her, unnaturally long, curved claws, and her equally long teeth jutted out from her mandibles, leaving her in serious risk of putting someone's eye out if she swung her head around too much. She strutted along the length of the table, eyes flashing in delight as other Sangheili hastily dived out of her way.

She was actually about a foot shorter than the Chief, but authority seemed to radiate out from her, so that even a passing Councilor backed away carefully to avoid the jagged elbows and pointed hooves.

"There's never enough canapÃ©s, there really ain't." She sighed, shaking her head, causing a nearby Elite to squeal and stagger back, clutching at his arm. "It's like talking to myself here." She stomped over to John and jabbed him with a finger, "hand me one of them things boy!" She snapped.

John, not used to this, dumbly handed her some kind of spherical beetle.

"Ta!" She waved her fingers at him and stalked away.

John frowned, not really willing to object to her behavior directly to her face. "Who is that?"

"You don't know Demon?" The Elite with the injured arm wandered over, mopping up a few drops of blood with a small sheet of silk. "That is Pala 'Feloeposis, of the Coven."

"I thought you're all from the Covenant."

"Coven, Demon, it's called the Coven. A sect of the civilian population utilizing the same basic role as the Councilors." The Elite shot Pala a furtive look. "Only their methods are generally more secretive."

"She seemed veryâ€¦ pushy."

"There are many schools of thought on the Coven." The Elite lowered his voice. "Many rumors circulating their motives, their designs, theirâ€¦ rituals. Some claim they lure unwary soldiers into cannibalistic rituals."

John glanced in Pala's direction. "Surprised she's still hungry then."

"Best not to mention it to them." The Elite muttered. "Besides, Pala is the lesser of two evils. Just be sure to avoid Elsa 'Daeconosis.' With a low chuckle the Elite turned to the overstocked table, "I'd rather criticize Grea's cuisine then come within ten meter's of Elsa."

At the end of the table, Grea glowered at the hapless Sangheili.

"Right," he backed away slightly, "I fear I mustâ€¦ inform certain sourcesâ€¦ implore delegates ofâ€¦ answer the call of natureâ€¦ Farewell Demon." He turned and marched quickly away.

"Always a pleasure," John closed his eyes and scooped as many objects off the table onto his plate as he dared.

There were a couple of plops as a pair of lovestruck worms made a bid for freedom.

Shame John's boot landed on them, really.

"Amazing isn't it?" Eva tipped a generous amount of Sangheili wine into her glass and took a long draught, "humans and Elites can blow one another's brains out but they can't seem to engage in idle chitchat." She smiled around at her companions. "Your thoughts?"

"Less and less with each passing moment," Esi giggled around her own glass.

"I think that, after spending years attempting to murder one another it's only acceptable that they might, probably, have a bit of a problem getting on," Miranda Keyes shrugged, "I do know though, that the Sangheili sent to Earth to aid in the rebuilding are getting on very well."

"Oh, well," Eva shrugged, "'builder' is the same in every language. Though I'll note you're sitting with us Miranda."

"Hood has enough Commanders and Councilors surrounding him, he doesn't need me as well. Anyway," she spread her hands in a supplicating gesture, "it's not like we can force the two together."

Eva held up a hand suddenly, one claw extended. She took another swig from her glass before speaking. "Can we not? I think it might be possible toâ€¦ force the two to converse of their own 'free will.'"

"Me doubt that," hunched over her rations, Nami grunted.

Esi sniffed, then immediately regretted it.

The tar-black substance in the almost organic-looking object clutched in the Unggoy's paw, the 'food nipple,' scorched the insides of the nostril and tended to caused rapid, unpleasant delusions in the minds of anyone sitting too near.

"Whad plan do you hab?" She groaned around the two claws she'd hastily rammed up her snout.

"Let me sort that out my dear Esi," Eva swung herself away from the table, then wandered over to a nearby Grunt Ultra. "Hey, Spegg."

"Whâ€¦?" Spegg twisted around sharply, revealing an odd marking, four golden vertical lines on his breastplate. "Oh, what you want Eva?"

Eva grinned, "I need your helpâ€¦"

The Arbiter stared blandly down at the foodstuffs lacing his plate. "Wellâ€¦" He offered generously, "you did your best, I suppose."

"My best?" John 117 cocked an eyebrow, "if you wanted something different you should've got it yourself. If you're going to leave me to fetch your food for you, put up with it."

"I'll give it my best." With an exaggerated grimace, the Arbiter picked through a pile of green and blue worms, "I mean really, these must be from the bottom of the bowl they are most listless and bland."

"I could say the same about you, Arbiter."

The Arbiter stiffened, then twisted his neck around.

There was a nearby table pushed close to the wall, slightly in shadow.

A female Sangheili was watching the Arbiter with a similar air that she probably would have reserved for an Unggoy.

The Arbiter frowned, "Elsa, what are you doing here? I did not know you went in for social gatherings."

"Someone has to be here. Who else?" Elsa shrugged.

She was clad in a long black robe, of some kind of silk but without the extravagance favored by most Sangheili. The plume on her head was a deep, blood red, and a swirling purple tattoo spiraled across her cheek, along her throat and disappeared down her chest.

Strange, fleshy tendrils hung off her head, the back of her neck and the back of her elbows.

"Elsa?" John frowned, "Elsa 'Daeconosis?"

"Yes." Elsa turned a baleful stare on him.

In the face of that dark stare, years of military training suddenly flew out the window, dragging John with it as he felt the terrible desire to stare at his feet and whimper uncontrollably.

Clenching his fists and straining against the childish fear, John stared resolutely at the end of her nose. His eyes were drawn to the fleshy tendrils bumping against the skin of her neck. "Interesting growth's, how long do you have left to live?"

Elsa chortled, without any trace of humor. "So you would be the Demon I've heard so little about. I thought you'd be taller."

"He looks bigger in his armor I assure you Elsa." Put in the Arbiter. He turned to John. "Those aren't growth's, they're aâ€¦ fashion, among certain Sangheili, mainly females." He flipped a black-headed maggot into his mouth, "you know we Sangheili are of a more reptilian breed. We shed our skin occasionally, I mean. There is a treatment done during the shedding phase using various natural chemicals, that attaches the old skin to the new before it flakes off completely, then it is cut off at the desired length then rolled up and treated again. Eventually new skin grows over it and makes the whole thing permanent. It is entirely painless, yet somewhat uncomfortable."

"They call itâ€¦" Elsa paused thoughtfully, "I suppose it translates best toâ€¦ Scalping."

John grimaced, "sounds unpleasant."

"Excuse me?" The Arbiter snapped, "from what I've read of your planet you humans stick plastic under your skin." He sneered. "_Plastic._"

A sudden commotion drew his attention to the main doors.

"Ah, now it's a party." The Arbiter visibly jumped as he suddenly realized Pala 'Feloeposis had materialized next to him with a stocked plate of food. "Oh my."

A huge group of Unggoy were waddling into the cafeteria, Eva and Spegg striding along in their midst. Spegg shot Eva a quick grin behind his mask, and shambling away.

Unlike the humans and Sangheili, the Grunts apparently had no reservations about where they sat, so long as the food nipples were

in plentiful supply.

Eva's plan relied on two constants in order to come into fruition. One, the Unggoy's reliance on methane caused a malodorous fug to congeal wherever they gathered in large quantities.

Two, the smell emanating out from a half-eaten food nipple could get strong enough to floor an Elite in a matter of seconds.

Eva swung herself onto the seat next to Miranda. "Problem solved Miss Keyes."

Esi bubbled happily into her drink, while Miranda shot Eva an unsure look. "I can only hope you're right."

Even as she said this, numerous Elites and marines hurriedly vacated their seats and moved towards less-crowded tables.

One Elite Councilor suddenly made his way over to their table.

"What," he hissed, placing one hand on Eva's shoulder and swiveling her around, "do you think you are doing?" His tone was harsh, clipped, and his cracked mandibles hinted at his old age.

Eva rose to her feet and adopted her most winning, subservient expression. "Apologies noble Councilor, I made a mistake earlier and ordered Esi to cobble together far too much Unggoy fare, and I had hoped to rectify this. I apologize again if youâ€¦"

"Do you take me for a fool?" The older Elite grasped her wrist and twisted, "you, all of you, continually flouting our rules, denying the true honor of the Covenant. Far too many of you haveâ€¦ disgraced us." His breath almost made Eva gag, alcohol was already crystallizing on his mandibles.

Miranda and several others half-rose, concerned looks flitting over their faces.

"If you thinkâ€¦!" The Elite suddenly gave a start as, to Eva's immense surprise, the Arbiter materialized between the two of them.

"Good day, I trust there isn't a problem here?" He smiled benevolently, "do you have a grievance here 'Felsolee?"

"Youâ€¦ Arbiter," 'Felsolee's expression twitched as terror and anger fought for supremacy. "Whatâ€¦?"

"Surely you have no objection to our Unggoy brothers joining us in this merriment?" The Arbiter continued lightly, gently easing the elder Elites hand away from Eva. "You know, it was of amazing interest to me this evening that, I could not help noticing that, only the Unggoy captains and Councilors appeared to be here. Surely not all the, ah, lesser Grunts had duties that would otherwise occupy their time in such a way?"

"Grunts!" 'Felsolee snorted, "Brothers?!? There is no wayâ€¦ no wayâ€¦"

"No way, indeed?" The Arbiter cocked a brow ridge, "how intriguing. Surely the Unggoy, by no means, earned a place at our side by joining us in battle? The Civil war, you remember?"

'Felsolee turned away, a mutinous expression twitching his face. "All cowards, we Sangheili fought harder then any!"

"Oh, indeed." The Arbiter nodded amiably, "in fact, I witnessed many of my brothers fight and die under the blows of the Fist of Rukt as they strove to rid the control room of Tartarus and his Jiralhanae. Although," he leaned in closer, "my memory perhaps is lacking in recent times but I do seem to recall," his voice dropped to a whisper, so only 'Felsolee heard it, "you were not among them."

The Arbiter leaned back again, beaming. "Have a pleasant day."

'Felsolee gave him a scandalized look, but mutely headed back to his seat.

"You seem to have Grea's knack for upsetting the higher classes." The Arbiter smiled at Eva, "enjoy your meal."

Eva stalked back to her seat, grinding her mandibles together in irritation as the Arbiter retreated.

"I think someone likes the Arbiter!" Esi chirped in a singsong voice.

Eva glowered. "Is it you, by any chance?"

Esi focussed her wildly swiveling eyes on Eva for a long drawn-out moment, before letting out a high-pitched giggle, "yes," now exhausted from the immense effort, Esi slumped forward, her jaw landing flat on the table.

Miranda gazed at the prone Sangheili, concerned. "Will she be alright?"

Eva sniffed, "once someone pulls her nose out of the Mildworms she willâ€¦"

"So, uhâ€¦" Sergeant Johnson stared muzzily at the table. "Iâ€¦ what, turn thisâ€¦?" He reached out hesitantly for a hexagonal object on the table.

"No!" Spegg slapped his hand away irritably, "you not get it, you not turn until it your turn. All you humans this stupid?"

"So then," Johnson frowned. "You turn yours then?"

Spegg shot him a withering look, "not if me intend to win." He flipped his own piece over.

Spegg, another Grunt, Johnson and an Elite, were gathered around a dark purple octagon placed in the center of the table, each with their own violet hexagonal piece, all of which were covered with

various patterns. "Okay," admitted Spegg at length, "we go over the rules againâ€|"

"Fear not Sergeant," the Elite sighed as Spegg started in a long list of rules about how the game was played, "the Unggoy games are always hard on the mind, they have so little else to think about."

Spegg glowered, "you want a thick mandible?"

The Sangheili chuckled, "impudent little monster aren't you?"

"Right," Spegg turned back to Johnson, "as me was sayingâ€|"

"Nah," Johnson leaned forward and put out his cigar on his own piece, "sod this, I fold, or forfeit or whatever," he stood up, abandoning his half-empty plate, "there's a poker game coupla tables away I think I'll join, hey O'riley deal me a hand!"

Almost as soon as he had left, the giggly little girl from maintenance slid into his seat, "hey there, any of you guys ever tried strip
_Jijeg_â€|?"

Fuka 'Hyoronmee stared down at his plate with a nervous expression.

Lord Hood watched him with almost reptilian patience. "Do you intend to finish today?"

Fuka scowled, "I will finish when I am ready." The Councilor picked up a slice of turkey with his 'finger utensils.'

A drop of cranberry sauce dripped off it.

"I think you have lied to me, this is not lizard."

"Well," Hood allowed a brief smile to flit over his features, "they were reptiles at one point in their history. They're birds now."

Fuka's eyes narrowed. "You are a most cruel and unusual human." He closed his mandibles around the object and made a big show of swallowing. "Your birds are less pleasant then ours."

"Funny, we say that about you too." A powerfully built human, Commander Roderick chuckled. "Fortunately your women more then make up for that."

Fuka's mate twisted around and scowled, "I do not believe that was a compliment."

"_Chaangri,_ you can hardly blame humans for their animosity to our appearance," said Fuka affectionately. "I mean, look at _them_."

The humans looked at themselves. "What about us?"

"Wellâ€¦" Fuka floundered, "justâ€¦ look at your mouths, I mean they move _up and down_." He winced. "Eugh."

"Well, so do Grunts, Jackels and Brutes." Roderick shrugged.

"Oh yes, and we ogle them _all the time_." Chimed in Fuka's mate sarcastically. "Real pretty."

Tenqa 'Daisommee tugged his shawl more tightly around his knees.

With a hand of cards clutched between his thin fingers, he raised his other hand, the one holding a glass, and waved it expectantly.

He had only to wait a second before Faela 'Teineyr leaned forward and refilled it, before sitting back down again on her haunches and gazing at the elder Sangheili in rapt fascination.

"Ahâ€¦ Tenqa." Sergeant Belle leaned forward across the table, "do you have any threes?"

"Go fish." Tenqa glanced down, "are you going to finish your Mildworms?"

Belle nudged her plate towards him, on which was piled a handful of the worms and one crusty spider.

"Eugh, this is lame." Groaned another, nearby marine, "can't we play something else?"

"Forgive me, I am an old man," Tenqa scowled, "I do not learn new information as quickly as you, though I believe I have at least grasped this. Any fives?"

"Yeah," the marine passed one over with a groan. "Can I join the poker game after this Sergeant?"

"Whateverâ€¦" Belle waved him away. "You still following the rules Paiko?"

The young Elite snickered sarcastically, "if the old one can remember I can, no disrespect to you 'Daisommee, anyâ€¦ uhâ€¦ ones, Miss Sergeant Belle?"

"Go fish," Belle offered, "we call them aces."

"Duly noted."

"Old," snorted Tenqa, "I am not old. I am mature. Very mature."

"Yeah, and I'm a bloody Spartan," Corporal Williams, sitting on the other side of Tenqa, chortled. He blew out a near-perfect smoke ring, siphoned off from his cigarette, and said, "any Aces 'Mister Mature?'"

"Not with that tone there won't be," snapped Tenga lightly, handing one over. "Now," he gave Faela a pointed look, his claw closing around his, now empty, glass, "any chance of a refill? Or something stronger?"

"My, this is fun isn't it?"

"Shutup."

"Indeed, this may even classify as a mild workout."

"I said, shut up."

"Shall I use some more effort?" With terrifying ease Taso' Ratanalee slowly twisted his arm around in the classic arm-wrestling pose, forcing the arms of the three marines attempting to fight against him down to the table.

"Oh, tough luck." Taso, stretched out his arm, massaging the muscles, "I'm still very impressed, you put up a reasonable fight."

A soft laugh by his side caused the marines to glower at his companion.

Tusa 'Falana, Taso's sister was perched on the side of the table, picking nondescript flecks of dust out from under her fingernails.

Clad in a flowing golden robe, she was far more elegant than the likes of Eva, with a massed quantity of 'scalped' skin spiraling down her neck and shoulders.

Tusa would've made the perfect match for a Councilor, was it not for Taso's overprotective tendencies.

Tusa examined her slender fingers, "any chance of there being a small _roundgrub_ anywhere?"

"I fear they have been picked clean." Taso winced as a sudden pain shot up his arm, "ah, it would appear you did more than I thought."

He gave sudden start as the lights went out.

One of the marines was very surprised when Tusa gave a small squeal and clasped his arm.

A light lit up an object at one end of the room.

It began gliding across the silent cafeteria, now all but devoid of food.

The spotlight followed it, revealing it to be an almost perfect replica of the _Pillar of Autumn_.

Miranda felt a choking breath claw its way out of her throat.

Eva's eyes narrowed, "oh Grea, no, you wouldn'tâ€¦"

The object glided across the room, drawing everyone's eyes as it passed.

"Quite a nice effect," complimented the Arbiter, while John grunted non-committedly.

It gave a neat barrel roll before landing carefully on the massive, ring-shaped centerpiece.

"Oh noâ€¦" Eva buried her face in her claws. "No no no no no noâ€¦"

The _Pillar of Autumn_ exploded.

Cubes of amber split apart from the ring, as the whole edifice came apart over its worm-filled sea.

A hidden anti-gravity generator beneath the table activated, causing all the golden blocks to remain hovering in a flickering sphere of light.

The Arbiter shook his head in disbelief, "if she had tried that a month ago Grea would have been dangling from a pole by her entrails with the Councilor's baying for her blood. Very impressive."

Elsewhere Eva had dared to open her eyes. "Oh thatâ€¦ thatâ€¦ thatâ€¦!" She sought for an appropriate word.

Sergeant Johnson leaned over from his table and whispered in the approximate area of her ear.

"Oh?" Eva frowned, "right, thanks. That bitch!"

"Outdone you again," Esi giggled, facing entirely the wrong way. "What a lovely wallâ€¦"

"Ahem." Near the back of the room, as the lights went back on, Grea rose to her feet, enduring mixed glares and looks of awe. "I would like to inform you that desert is ready, each block is a lump of crystallized _Direweb_ spider nectar, said to be among the most sought after tastes in the galaxy. Enjoy."

"Why didn't you say so?" Pala 'Feloeposis quickly stood up and hustled towards the hovering chunks of honey, "it's about bloody time."

The Arbiter snickered, "well it's nice to see that the destruction of the ring is considerably sweeter this time. Do you not agree Demon?"

John surveyed the Arbiter for a long moment, before stating, "yeah, you are a dork."

The Arbiter takes a swig from his glass of fruit juice to wash down the honey.

"_Ah, fantastic, a perfect evening all round."_

He looks up suddenly as the main door hisses open.

A naked figure streaks in, waving its arms wildly and gibbering.

"_All right, that's it!" The Arbiter snarls, leaping to his feet.
"Get back here and finish the next chapter you lazy bastard!"_

11. Date

_Right, so as of this update my story is now officially AU. Just consider it following after Halo 3 but with a few key differences.

—

_Thank's to doctor anthony for the idea for this chapter.

—

_Disclaimer I do not own anything relating to the__Halo universe._**

>

Date

"No offence Arbiter, but we generally do that the other way around."

The Arbiter looked up, a smirk of amusement flitting over his mandibles. "I'm sorry, I had no idea certain rules governed my behavior in this way. I'll be more careful in future." He gave a wry smile and lay back on the bench. With only a minor grunt of effort, he raised his legs one hundred and thirty-five degrees from the floor.

This wouldn't be a particularly impressive feat but for the barbell spread across his ankles.

Miranda Keyes shook her head, grinning. "You Elites really never cease to impress me."

"Strong legs Miss Keyes, it's a staple part of our being. With these, I could kick your ribcage straight out of your chest."

"No doubt." Miranda shifted slightly and went back to her own exercises.

In the crowded Gym, numerous marines and one or two Elites made use of their current well of spare time. There was even one Unggoy, showing what chimp-like arms could do on a metal bar.

The Arbiter paused and stared at Miranda for a few moments.

The Commander was making use of the dumbbells, showing quite clearly that her slim arms held more strength than one would guess at first glance.

He cocked his head on one side. This was the first time he'd seen the

woman in casual clothes, for all that she'd berated the Master Chief about it.

Just a simple singlet and short ensemble seemed to be sufficient, as it was the trend matched by many others in the room, even the Elites were casually dressed. Only he and the Unggoy stood out, though in the Grunt's case it was because his methane filter took an afternoon's work to separate from the armor.

"Taking in the sights Arbiter?" Miranda chortled.

"Just intrigued Miss Keyes." Said the Arbiter carefully. "You were in here since before I arrived and you still seem to be going strong."

"Forgive me for trying to stay in shape." Said Miranda, "but I'd rather not class myself as one of those who think half an hour on the treadmill is a hefty workout."

"Quite."

The two shared a joint smile of equals enjoying one another's company.

Several meters away, the giggly girl from maintenance glowered.

She was on the treadmill, and did deem that half an hour was ample time to build up a sweat. At times she felt that Miranda was personally having a go at her.

"Honestly though Arbiter," Miranda set down her weights and smiled. "Really, with the amount of politics lately I haven't had a lot of time toâ€¦ wellâ€¦"

The Arbiter stared at her politely. "Yes?"

"Learn anything about you. Erâ€¦" Miranda waved her arms expansively, "you know, your culture, your attitudes, your traditions. Your raceâ€¦ I suppose."

"Ah, a worthwhile endeavor." The Arbiter hefted the barbell, one-handed with apparent ease, and set it down on its stand. "We could discuss it over a lunch break perhaps? Shortly I will have to return to my duties, but for the moment I am free."

"Ahâ€¦" Miranda shifted uneasily. "I was aiming for a bit of greater depth. Sort of."

"Indeed? A days work maybe?"

"Were it that easyâ€¦" Miranda murmured. She shook her head and continued brightly, "yes I think something like that would work. If you don't mind, that is."

"Oh, certainly not," the Arbiter stretched, "I would be overjoyed to inform you of all you wanted to know. Shall we sayâ€¦ three days time? Eight hundred hours? Your military time?" He held out his hand.

Miranda laid her palm in his, and the Arbiter's claws closed gently

over her fingers. "Sounds perfect."

"See you in such time, Miss Keyes."

Both suddenly gave a start at the sound of pounding footsteps, and only whipped their heads around in time to see the sole of the maintenance girl's sneaker disappearing out the door.

"What's gotten into her?"

Sergeant Major Avery Johnson fumed at the elevator door.

"Alright you bastard," he growled around his cigar, "you don't like me and I sure-as-hell don't like you. But don't you even begin to think about makin me wait for ten blasted minutes you hear me?"

The elevator was silent.

"I said," Johnson snarled around the smoke, "do you hear me?"

A shrill metallic whine echoed from a panel near the doors, followed by a monotonous drone. "Affirmative. I Hear By Standard Aural Receptors Connected To My Being That Serve A Far Superior Role To Your Eaâ€|"

"Alright, alright," Johnson snapped. "I don't need your life's story. Just don't keep me waiting next time. You got it?"

"Affirmative."

"Bloody machines."

"I Hold You In Contempt For The Desecration Of My Feelings."

"I'm not apologizing! I shouldn't have to, this is my ship."

"Irrelevant."

"Alright you tin can I'm gonnaâ€|" Johnson paused as footsteps skittered down the hall towards him.

"Johnson!" The perky voice that followed the feet almost made Johnson wince.

"Aw come on! As if my day was bad enough already!" He whirled around and glared down at the giggly little maintenance girl. "You'd better have a good reason for interrupting me. I'm in a highly sophisticated argument on a level you'll never ascertain."

"Really?" The girl looked past him at the stubbornly closed elevator doors. "Hey Jell0, how're you doing?"

The panel beeped. "Very Well, Thank You."

"Johnson giving you a hard time?"

"Affirmative."

The girl tutted under her breath. "Naughty, naughty Johnson. I spent ages programming that AI."

"And you called him Jello?" Johnson gaped incredulously. "Girl you are a nut job and a half."

"Sure, whatever you want." She winked. "Truth be told Johnson, I'm not here to pay Jell0 a visit."

"Oh, really?" Johnson cocked an eyebrow. "That's a shame, you don't know whatcha missin."

Jell0's doors hissed open with an unnecessarily loud 'ding!' A couple of marines walked out. "Thirty Fifth Floor." Snapped Jell0. "Gymnasium And A Huge Jerk!"

The maintenance girl shook her head sadly. "If he had eyes he'd be cryin." She brightened. "Anyhoo, Johnson, got a little proposition for ya."

"'For you _sir_.'" Johnson corrected. "And I'm not listenin. You girl, are a disaster waiting to happen. Sorry, correction, a disaster what has happened and is strangely curving back around for another shot at it, possibly with a rain of frogs in tow."

"That's the spirit." The girl rapped him on the arm with her knuckle. "Okay smoky, just hear me out."

"Do I have a choice?" Johnson groaned as the elevator doors slammed closed behind him.

"Tough Luck Bitch."

He jabbed the 'up' button several times, then turned back to the girl. "So, what's this new torture."

"A little wager." She flexed her shoulders. "If you would."

"I wouldn't."

"Indeed. A facilitation of production values in a manner of one certain circumventionâ€¦"

"Whoa, easy there college girl." Johnson scowled. "We're not all overachievers."

> "Oh don't worry, I was just spouting shit," she grinned, "I'm placing a little bet on Miranda."<p>

"On what, exactly? That she actually gets five hours sleep for once?" Johnson snorted. "After all these diplomatic things I can't remember when I last saw her without bags under her eyes."

"I think she's taking some time off. With the Arbiter."

Johnson's expression didn't change. "I'm listening."

"If I'm any judge they'll be heading to the Amazon."

"Yes?" Johnson prompted.

"The station, not the jungle." The maintenance girl grinned again. "I imagine to talk about culture and things. My wager is this; by the end of the day I bet they'll express one gesture of affection to each other. Human or otherwise."

Johnson eyed her warily, "intentional?"

"Duh."

"I'll take that bet. Fifty bucks?"

"Make it a round hundred, plus extra's." The girl's grin widened further.

"Like what? Cos you're not getting my laptop. I need that."

"No, nothing like that." The girl spread her arms innocently. "I'd just like you to throw out your collection ofâ€| aha, magazines."

Johnson narrowed his eyes. "What?"

She coughed meaningfully.

"Aw hell girl," Johnson snarled, "how dare you even think that! Those are weapons and ammunition magazines. You know my policy on pornography! The Navy's a family place."

"Yah, I know." The girl nodded. "I've seen what you do to marines you catch with the, uh, magazines."

"Too right."

"But," she raised her eyebrows, "if we're going to regard your magazines, I'd like to draw your attention to, ahem; 'Miss 'big-guns' February.'"

"I can't control all subject matter," Johnson muttered. "There's some very good articles."

"Wearing little more than a thong and a shotgunâ€|" Maintenance girl continued.

"They put one of my speeches in the editorial." Johnson sighed. "Got it hung up on my wall somewhere."

"â€|Pretty sure she takes up two whole pages." Supplemented the girl.

"I wouldn't have subscribed, but O'Riley wrote up the formâ€|" Johnson groaned. "Okay, fine. But only if you understand that that kinda thing doesn't interest me in the least."

"Absolutely."

"Now it's your turn." Johnson stubbed out his cigar on Jell0's

panel.

"Jerk."

Johnson peered at her thoughtfully. "Tell you what. If you lose, then for the next month you must shut up."

"What?"

"Yep." Johnson beamed. "You only get to speak when spoken to, and no sass-back!"

The girl grunted. "Fine."

"Great." Johnson gave a snort as the elevator door hissed open. "Call it a date."

He stepped through, but as the door closed, shot his hand out and caught it, leaning towards the girl. "Oh, and one more thing. Lookin good there Miss July."

The doors closed over his smirk, as the maintenance girl turned a solid shade of red.

"Oh I'll get you for that
Johnsonâ€|"

John 117 sighed and slumped back against the wall in one of the Cairo's danker hallways.

This was generally the Spartan's equivalent of slobbing out in an easy chair.

He'd been feeling a bit strained lately, yet unable to detect the reason.

True, he had beenâ€| alone more then usual. Johnson was often on business, Miranda seemed more politically inclined then ever, the Arbiter always seemed busy with training exercises for young Sangheili recruits and Cortanaâ€| Wasn't around so often.

The Chief didn't know why this bothered him, but it did.

And the fact that Guilty Spark kept hovering around him lately like a lost puppy wasn't helping either.

Alone in the world, but not _left _alone _by_the world.

Except now, of course.

Some were saying that they should put him back in a cryotube, 'you know, until the next war.'

They smiled when they said it, butâ€|

The Chief groaned and shook his head.

Suddenly he stiffened.

His motion detector indicated the approach of a figure. The Chief pushed off from the wall and spun around, only seeing an empty hallway on all sides.

His fingers flexed, without a weapon he settled into a ready stance, prepared to fight.

Flight never even crossed his mind.

So he wasn't prepared for the small orb that rolled across the ground towards him.

His motion sensor went berserk, red dots filled his vision like helmet-measles.

Radar jammer! He never thoughtâ€|

He froze as a hand landed on his shoulder and the point of a knife pressed into the small of his back.

A voice hissed in his ear. "You're out of practice Chief."

The Spartan winced, the synthetically strengthened knife was designed to punch through an Elite's breastplate, and MJOLNIR armor would be lucky to last _that _long.

"If I hit the right spot, you'll never move again." Continued the voice conversationally. "And if I hit the wrong spotâ€| well, you won't even be that lucky."

The Master Chief snarled, swiping his arm bonelessly behind his own back, intent on grabbing his assailant's hand, only for them to pull away with terrifying speed.

The Chief whirled around with all the grace of a dancer.

Anyone who could have seen his face would've been surprised by the fact that he was smiling. "Kelly."

The figure in front of him smirked slightly, sliding her knife back into its sheath.

She was quite a tall woman, sinewy and pale.

Clad in only basic military garb, the drab green set off the vibrant blue of her short-cropped hair.

She saluted primly. "Spartan 087, Kelly sir, reporting for duty."

The Chief returned the gesture and said gruffly. "Good to see you Kelly. You look well."

"Thank you Chief."

He nodded at her hair. "Had it re-dyed?"

"I quite like it sir." Kelly ran her fingers through her rough

tresses. "You approve?"

"I'm willing to approve of anything right now Kelly." John unclasped his helmet and tucked it under his arm. "Just nice to see friendly face that doesn't have four lips."

"Thank you. Ahê|" Kelly looked shifty. "An informal hug wouldn't be too much to ask for would it?"

"It would."

"Thought so." Kelly held out her hand. "I'm glad I found you sir. I missed you."

John clasped her hand in his own, heavy-gauntleted one.
"Likewise."

Miranda Keyes rested her clenched hands on her knees in the darkest corner of the Pelican, trying as hard as she could to ignore the stares of the other marines.

She shivered slightly, not so much from cold, but instead from the sudden _exposed _feeling welling up in her chest.

She'd never yet realized it, but as much as she berated the Chief about it, she almost never seemed to dress casually.

It was always one uniform, work uniform, formal naval uniform, gym uniform and her dressê| formal banquet uniform.

Oh crap, should she have worn makeupê|?

No, no don't be stupid, this was the _Arbiter_. The guy had a face like a scaly, gray, half-peeled banana.

She sighed and looked down at herself.

Maybe she had overdid itê|

With a sensibly casual black skirt ending just past her knees, and a plain denim jacket she didn't feel like she was overdoing it butê|

The tank-top with an eagle motif ending just above her midriff and the high-heels seemed to be pushing it but the little maintenance girl had _insisted_.

Drat, she was really going to have to learn the girl's name one of these days.

With a jolt, the Pelican stopped.

The back panel groaned open and Miranda stepped out onto the deck of the Amazon.

She could actually _feel _the marines checking her out.

"Tough luck lads." She murmured.

She wandered over to an elevator and tapped the panel.

"Greetings." Chirped a tinny female voice. "How May I Help You Today?"

"I'd like to go to the leisure deck, please." She said.

"Affirmative. Please Step This Way."

The doors hissed open, and as Miranda passed through them she noted the name etched at the bottom of the panel.

Trifle.

Miranda sighed and stood primly in the center of the elevator, hands behind her back, as the floors of the Amazon whirred by.

"May I Inquire As To The Nature Of This Visit?" Said Trifle politely.

Miranda nodded. She knew it wouldn't donate any memory cells to the information, it was all just programming, "I'm here onâ€¦ sort of business. Just aâ€¦ meeting. An informal meeting."

"Oh." Trifle hummed. "I Trust You Will Have A Pleasant Day. The Leisure Deck Has Just Gone Through Maintenance."

"Sounds good, I just hope the Arbiter likes it. I imagine he could do with a more favorable view of humanity."

"Yes?" Trifle offered.

"Yes."

Miranda smiled vaguely as the door's swished open. "Have a good day."

"Haveâ€¦" The machine paused in its recorded dialogue. "Umâ€¦ Yes."

Chuckling, Miranda strode out onto the deck.

She wandered past a group of Marines, all in civvies, and strolled towards the main leisure bay.

As the glass doors hissed open to permit her into the entrance chamber, she looked around with a quirked eyebrow.

The Arbiter was nowhere to be seen.

She headed towards a likely character, a tall Sangheili in grand scarlet robes, and cleared her throat loudly.

As he turned she said carefully, "umâ€¦ hello, sorry to interrupt you but have you seenâ€¦ theâ€¦ Arbiter?"

The elite grinned, and as if in answer, hooked a claw through his

lapel and pulled the front of his robe down to reveal the Mark of Shame upon his chest. "You are on time Miss Keyes, this is good."

"Arbiter?" Miranda repeated blandly. "Youâ€| you look so different."

"Merely a change of wardrobe Miss Keyes." The Arbiter spun neatly on his heel and halted with a flourish. "The Councilors have been debating my position within the Covenant, 'Arbiter' being a Prophet-appointed rank. Sadly I still bear the armor, but I am allowed to wearâ€| civvies."

He rifled around in his robes for a few moments and withdrew a small purple object, about the size of a book. "Aha, since our last meeting I have compiled a bit of data that may interest you." He tossed it to her, and Miranda caught it with a grunt. It was heavier then it looked.

With a gallant smile the Arbiter held out his arm. "Shall we move out?"

Miranda greatly took the proffered limb. "Lets."

The two strutted away and disappeared through the airy arch at the other end of the chamber.

After a few moments, two familiar figures detached themselves from the shadows and followed the departing companions.

The giggly maintenance girl murmured something in Johnson's ear.

"_That_ doesn't count."

"Welcome, Arbiter, to the Amazon."

Miranda spread her arms grandly.

The Arbiter looked around. "Not very big is it?"

Miranda scowled, "well of course not, this is just the information room. The proper place is through the doors at the end."

"A lot of doors in your stations Miss Keyes." Commented the Arbiter.

"Like you're one to talk!" Miranda snorted. "Just take a look around."

"Hmmm." The Arbiter peered at the walls.

They were made of wood, undoubtedly with metal behind, but the thought was there.

Upon each and every surface there seemed to be information, pictures

and mounted bits of Earth's flora and fauna.

He walked over to a stuffed weasel and peered into its lifeless eyes for a few moments. Then he nodded gravely. "A trophy I see. Surely this beast is more formidable than it appears or you would not see fit to mount it in this way."

"No it's just to show you what one looks like," Miranda snapped. She was attempting to work the 'data-box' but could find no buttons, holes or grips on its smooth surface.

"Fascinating." The Arbiter turned away from the animal's accusing glare, "and now I know."

He reached over and rapped his knuckle on the box several times.

With an extended whine, it split open, displaying buttons and a screen. "Shall we move on?"

Miranda pushed past him and led the way through the hanging strips of plastic that served as the entrance.

"This," she said with a flourish as the Arbiter entered after her. "_Is_ the Amazon."

The Arbiter gazed silently around for a few moments. Then he glanced at Miranda and the wooden deck she was standing on.

He strode out to a wooden rail and leant on it.

It creaked alarmingly, but didn't give out. He gazed around again.

"Impressive." He admitted at length.

He appeared to be in a vast cavern of a room, preceded over by an artificial sky.

The room was crisscrossed by more of the plank decks, similar to the ones on Sanghelios, though not nearly as high up, large or made of the same wood.

Sprouting up from the earth below were trees of a like the Arbiter had never seen before.

Strange birds swooped over his head, and the Arbiter gave a start of shock as one of particularly fine plumage disappeared into a small lake with barely a ripple.

"Your uh birds swim?" He hazarded.

Miranda smiled happily, "some of them. Don't yours?"

"Sadly no." The Arbiter turned to look at Miranda as she joined him against the railing. "What is this place?"

"The leisure center of the Amazon." She said unhelpfully. She sighed as the Arbiter glared, "we humans are creatures of atmosphere, we can't take stress or loneliness without succumbing to some kind of

madness."

"Loneliness?" The Arbiter cocked a brow ridge. "In a crowded place like this?"

"You know what I mean." Miranda snorted. "Loneliness for home, for familiar settings forâ€¦ for the Earth."

"Ah, now I believe we are on the same page."

"Yes. So, because we can't afford to give everyoneâ€¦ Earth leave, whenever they need time off we've had all this," she waved her arm expansively, "installed. Like the mall back in the Cairo. We can't be soldiers all the time."

"Can you not?" The Arbiter grinned. "I don't believe I've seen you be anything but. Until now."

"Well, now's my chance then." Miranda tapped several buttons on the 'data-box,' and almost dropped it when a holographic Sangheili sprouted out of the center and twirled neatly.

"Ah," the Arbiter peered down at it, "that's Tusa 'Falana, kindly performing one of our traditional dances. She kindly made the offer but yesterday."

"Oh. Well she'sâ€¦ veryâ€¦ pretty?" Miranda hazarded. "I think."

"Tusa?" The Arbiter laughed. "She is only one of the fairest and most comely Sangheili I have had the pleasure to acquaint myself with."

"You meanâ€¦?" Miranda swallowed.

The Arbiter's laugh died down to low chuckle. "I mean I know her. Her overprotective brother Taso does not allow her much for relationships. Especially not with an Arbiter."

"Well," Miranda carefully reached over and squeezed his hand. "One can only hope, huh?"

"Yes." The Arbiter smiled. "One can."

Fortunately neither of the two heard Johnson hiss, "that _doesn't_ count!"

"So," John 117 set down a pair of paper coffee cups at a table in the cafeteria, "what brings you out here?"

Kelly, seated at the other end of the table, drew the cup over to herself and too a draught before answering. "Merely the honor of seeing you here sir. Of course."

Both Spartans had managed to dredge up civilian dress, almost matching in 'simple-but-boring' styles of either green or blue.

"That's the answer I expected." John admitted. "But what's the real reason?"

"Oh, you know," Kelly waved airily. "Another mission, another life to protect, another job to flawlessly accomplish. The standard fee."

"What job?"

Kelly leaned closer. "Can't just say to anyone sir, but you were intended to know anywayâ€|" Kelly shrugged, "it's the Prime Minister of the United Earth Federation. He's going to Sangheilios to meet with the High Councilors on their own turf. Now, despite all the safety offered by his hosts, he wants a specific bodyguard. A Spartan. Guess which one he chose."

"Ah," John nodded and leaned back. He smiled stiffly at her. "Well, it's a nice place. I'm sure you'll enjoy it. My advice would be to invest in a tan before then, because when I went I burnt likeâ€| well, Johnson kept calling me 'Lobster' for a week so let's leave it at that."

"Thank you sir." Kelly smiled back, "but I've still wondered, why send me? Why not, you know, Spartan 117 the Master Chief?"

"Well," said John expansively, "first off I believe they don't think I'll focus as much as you. I think they think I've been spending too much time with the Elites lately, the Arbiter in particular, and may have somewhat clouded judgement over the matter. They think I'll be too trusting of Sangheili honor to pay as much attention as someone moreâ€| suspicious. They're probably right, I'd be more worried about a Jackal assassin loose on the planet. If one of those got him then we could be looking at negotiations deteriorating to a complete standstill, possibly with the threat of a civil war."

"I can see you've given this some thought." Kelly sounded impressed, but not entirely surprised.

"That's only one point," John waved this away, "on another, you've always been faster than me. Faster reflexes, faster running speed, faster in every way I'm not. I could take a bullet for the Prime Minister. You could take out the assassin before he even gets a shot off."

"Wellâ€| thank you sir." Kelly flushed slightly. "But I always thought you were pretty talented in that department. Certainly you covered the distance across Halo pretty well."

Several meters away a purple flicker erupted out of a console.

Cortana glanced from one Spartan to the other. "Ooo, Drama/Romance, fun."

"Not that I'm complainingâ€|" > "Well good."<p>

"It's onlyâ€|"

"Yes?"

"Well, you understandâ€|"

"Mhm?"

"Not that it's a problemâ€|"

Miranda turned and grinned at the Arbiter, "you're not having difficulties are you?"

The Arbiter scowled. Three birds were sitting on the back of his neck and shoulders. "Our birds don't do this."

"They're just grooming you."

"Indeed, and I appreciate the gesture but it is highly undignified. It's stealing my natural parasites!"

"Gross. How unfortunate."

> "Oh be quiet, some of those are quite necessary thank you." The Arbiter shook himself, sending the birds shrieking away.

Miranda grinned. "Well, at least you're communing with nature. It's a start." She tapped a few buttons on the data-box and several Sangheili vases flashed across the screen. "I like the architecture. This one in particular's pretty nice." She showed him.

"Ah, you mean the mural of my people slaughtering the Jackal hordes of _Salfamus_?"

"Really?" Miranda turned the box upside down and peered at it. "Oh, I see. I've changed my mind about it now, I think."

"_I_ personally always liked it." The Arbiter gently reached out into a tangle of plants. "Your flora though, may go some way to matching it." He tugged a flower towards him and sniffed. "Sometimes the greatest experiences in life are the most gentle, the most fragrant. The subtle aroma of life is always a pleasure."

"Quite the poet." Miranda mused.

The Arbiter chuckled. "Hardly." He twisted the flower and snapped it off its stem. "I carve ballads with a blade, not a pen." He handed it to her. "But sometimes it's nice to stop and smell the flowers. You know, rather than blood and the decaying flesh of Flood victims."

"I'm certain," Miranda waved the bloom under her nose, then tucked it behind her ear. She noticed the Arbiter's_look_. "What?"

"Very nice." The Arbiter complimented. "It completely fails to match your eyes."

"Charming." Miranda brushed a lock of hair away from her face. "You know Arbiter, I'veâ€|" Miranda paused at the flurry of pink objects suddenly fluttering around her head. She looked up. "Do you see any

blossoms? Weird."

The Arbiter gazed at her uncomfortably for a few moments, then twitched his head in the direction of the treetops. He thought he heard a voice mutter, "come on girl, that's cheating!"

He dusted a pile of pink petals off his shoulder. "You were saying?"

"Oh, yes Iâ€|"

"COVIE BASTARDS!"

Miranda winced as the Arbiter glanced around wildly. "Oh noâ€|"

With a horrendous screech, a large white bird materialized in a flurry of feathers on the rail. Long talons dug grooves into the wood, a maliciously curved beak stared the Arbiter down while mad red eyes swiveled with disconcerting aberration.

"What on Sangheliosâ€|?" Mused the Arbiter.

The bird managed to focus on him briefly, and then nipped at his probing claws in a friendly way that nevertheless contrived to indicate that fingers were a privilege, not a right.

"It's thatâ€| blasted cockatoo again!" Miranda waved angrily at the bird in an attempt to ward it off. "No idea who brought it in in the first place."

> "COVIE BASTARDS!" The bird glowered at the Arbiter,
"Bastards!"<p>

Miranda groaned and covered her face with her hand, "ignore him, he says that to everyone. Johnson spent aâ€| constructive afternoon, teaching it."

Up in the treetops, balanced on a tree branch, the giggly maintenance girl spared Johnson a glance. "Really?" She cocked an eyebrow.

Johnson, laid back against the trunk, shrugged, "I was bored, the Covenant had just blown up three of our ships, the bird was there andâ€| it was just meant to be."

The girl shrugged, "well, whatever," she leaned over, "oh, and by the way, did you know that to the average Sangheili the gesture of raising ones head and exposing the neck is an act of extreme intimacy. It's a display of trust that goes back to the days when a Sangheili would tear out his or her opponent's throat with their teeth." She grinned smugly.

"Really," Johnson cocked an eyebrow. "I'm impressed. Oh, one thing though," he interrupted as she opened her mouth to say something, "it's also used by the bastards to_intimidate_ their enemies. It says, 'hey, look at me you ugly SOB, I'm showing off my weak spot and you can't do a thing about it!'" He returned an equally smug look. "Got some advice for you girl, try _talking_ to the aliens instead of studyin them like animals. You know the guys don't even know your name."

The giggly maintenance girl pouted. "But you_insult_ them all the time."

"I insult people all the time. Ya dumbâ€| brunette."

The Arbiter growled at the bird. "Did you know Miranda, _our_ birds don't talk." He leaned towards the cockatoo and leered menacingly. "Because we ate all the ones that did."

Miranda sighed and took his hand, "come on, I know a quieter spot where we can talk without bloody Johnson's demon bird."

Up in the treetops a few leaves fluttered to the ground.
"Yes!"

"How, exactly, did this happen?"

John groaned into his hands. "No idea."

"I've asked them to move, but they justâ€| won'tâ€| listenâ€|" Kelly growled.

John slammed his fist on the table.

Several feet away, Private O'Riley glowered at him, affronted. "Come on sir, I'm just trying to have some quality time here."

Perched on his lap, with an equally annoyed look, a woman with short-cropped, scarlet hair and a roughly hacked up military uniform, lightly entwined her arms around his neck. "Just ignore them Riles." She glared at the Spartan's again. "All the other seats are full, put up with it."

"Umâ€| Pennyâ€|" O'Riley coughed. "They are kind ofâ€|"

"Pfft!" Penny snorted. "We're not in the army now grouchy. Suck it up."

Kelly rolled her eyes. "Ah the lower class civilian. Not even a soldier and she's giving me orders. Me! I could kill you three times over before you even see me move."

"Now Kelly," John smiled stiffly, "let's try not to upset O'Riley. He might bite."

"Feh, what'd you know?" Snapped O'Riley. "I've been here, what, ten minutes, and you've barely even glanced at _your_ girlfriend."

"Myâ€| what?" John gazed at him in disbelief. "Private, do you even know what the Spartan project _is_?"

"Yeah O'Riley," all four occupants of the table gave a start of shock as Cortana materialized behind them, "I mean, honestly, he spends every waking moment with an attractive naked purple woman and heâ€| he won't eâ€|even touch meâ€| anymore." She mock-sobbed into her hands. "Why won't you look at me!"

John sighed. "You don't think it's time we got a new AI do you Kelly?"

"I'm not too thrilled about our current one certainly," said Kelly dryly, "do they come in 'dull' or do you have to beat it into them?"

Cortana shrugged, "it's funny isn't it, I can't even take the hint." She grinned. "You two look nice."

Kelly rolled her eyes in John's direction. "Is it just me or is this place gettingâ€¦ crowded?"

John groaned. "Suggestions?"

Kelly stood and held out her arm. "Come on."

"Well, I'll give you this Miss Keyes." The Arbiter neatly folded his legs underneath himself. "This is very much improved. So, you are saying Marines come here often?"

Miranda leant back against the trunk of a tree. "Whenever they want toâ€¦ enjoy nature."

"Indeed."

With a pleasant expression, the Arbiter surveyed the scene before him.

A small clearing of flower-studded grass surrounded by trees, nearby a secluded pool of crystal clear waterâ€¦ etcetera, etcetera, etceteraâ€¦

You know the usual fare for these things.

The Arbiter stretched leisurely. "Still enjoying the information? I spent quite a while building that up."

"Mmm." Miranda prodded at the data-box a few times. "I've been looking at it on the way over here. Thanks for translating it too."

"Oh, believe me, that was no mean feat." The Arbiter smirked. "You have no idea how hard it is to find an appropriate word for _Rikkak_ in your language."

"Yes," Miranda paused, "is that the one that meansâ€¦?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Miranda flushed. "_That_ may not have been necessary."

"Sorry," said the Arbiter demurely, "no offence meant."

"Ohâ€¦ oh no." Miranda smiled, a blush spreading across her cheeks, "I justâ€¦ well I've neverâ€¦ I wasn'tâ€¦"

The Arbiter smiled kindly and took the data-pad from her unresisting hands. "I'll just edit those bits out shall I?"

Miranda nodded, still grinning vaguely. "Some areas of culture should not be probed."

"Indeed."

The young ship commander sighed and gently flicked her hair out of her eyes. Reclining on the grass, letting the artificial sunlight paint a dappled jigsaw puzzle across her face, she turned to stare at the Arbiter.

For some reason he'd seen fit to roll his sleeves up, and the light etched out every muscle on his rangy arms with crystal clarity.

His face was scrunched up in thought, all four mandibles pursed, while the corners of his mouth twitched up in a roguish smirk.

His gleaming eyes twitched in her direction, then turned back to the screen. "Problems Miss Keyes?"

"Not really," Miranda rolled over onto her stomach, resting her chin on her hand, "you're just looking veryâ€¦ scenic today."

"How very kind of you." The Arbiter turned the data-box upside down. "Oh my, how did that get on there? Those blasted Grunts must've got a hold of it, honestly if you can't trust the subservient little devils whom can you trust?" He glanced up again. "Whyâ€¦ why have you closed your eyes?"

"Hmm?" Miranda beamed. "Just trying to put a face your voice. It really is quiteâ€¦ sonorous."

"Well, thank you," the Arbiter tossed the data-box onto the grass next to her. "Glad you enjoy it. Tell me though," he stretched out his legs, happily dangling his hooves in the pond. "Is that a new scent about you, something floral perhaps?"

Miranda's hand flew to the flower still tucked behind her ear. "No. I don't really believe in perfumes."

"That so?" The Arbiter swung his legs out of the water and bounded to his feet. "Right then." He bent down and picked a discarded apple off the ground. He brandished it under her nose. "Pretend this is a plasma grenade."

"Oâ€¦kâ€¦" Miranda stared at it, perplexed.

The Arbiter drew back his hand, and hurled it into the air.

There was a rustle of leaves, a muffled thud and a curse.

Then, with a crashing of branches and a shower of foliage, the giggly maintenance girl plunged from above and landed in the Arbiters arms.

"Uhâ€¦ hi." She gave a dazed wave.

The Arbiter sniffed. "Floral." He let the girl drop to the ground.

"Ow." The girl groaned and rubbed her backside, "incidentally it's called 'Summer Roses.' Like it?"

Miranda loomed over her. "What, are you doing here?"

"Umâ€¦"

"I am a superior officer I'll have you know." Miranda growled. "Spying on such is a punishable offence."

"Uhâ€¦" The girl looked nervously at her thunderous expression. "Would you believe I flew here?"

Miranda scowled.

"Guess not." The girl winced. "Okay, before you kill me, may I plead my case?"

The Arbiter stalked around behind her. "I wonder, what other players have joined in this farce."

The girl grimaced, "please don't bite me."

The Arbiter leant forward, under his head was hovering over her shoulder. "Fear not, I don't like you enough for _that_." He breathed huskily.

The maintenance girl took a couple of steps away from him. "Really, I'm sorry I justâ€¦"

"Whoa there, hold on Miranda." With another rustle of leaves, Johnson dropped neatly from the trees. "Don't go killin her yet."

"Ah," The Arbiter spread his arms and turned his gaze up to the heavens. "Player two, you join us at last."

"Easy squid face." Johnson spat, "Miranda," he turned imploringly to her, "You can take a joke right? The girl and I justâ€¦ struck up a littleâ€¦ bet."

"On what?" Miranda narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"Testing alien to human social relations." The maintenance girl giggled nervously.

"She wanted to see if you'd make out." Johnson smirked.

Miranda looked affronted, while the Arbiter muttered, "we did make it somewhat 'outside,' though I don't see what the excitement isâ€¦"

"Please Miranda," the girl begged, "it was only a joke." She pouted hopefully.

Miranda frowned, then glanced at Johnson. "Wait, did you say you bet _against_ ourâ€¦ social relationship."

"Wellâ€¦" Johnson frowned. "Yeahâ€¦"

"Right." Miranda reached around and grabbed the Arbiter's collar. "Really sorry about this."

"About whaâ€¦" The Arbiter choked as Miranda pressed her lips to the end of his mouth.

As Johnson and the maintenance girl watched, open-mouthed, Miranda gently cupped the Arbiter's approximate chin in her hand and continued to kiss him deeply.

Then she pulled away.

They looked deeply into one another's eye for a long moment.

Then the Arbiter blinked.

"Oh Forerunners, there's spit on my mandibles!" He gagged and ran over to the pond, collapsed by its side and buried his face in its depths.

"Oh you son of aâ€¦" Johnson groaned, while the maintenance girl grinned slightly and patted the Arbiter awkwardly on the back.

Miranda smiled blissfully back at him. "You lose then?"

"Gaah! I think I felt your lingua in my mouth!" The Arbiter wailed, snorting water. "Oh Forerunners!" He splashed under to surface again. "I taste saliva. And it's not mine!"

"So," the giggly maintenance girl grinned at Johnson, "you need a hand shifting boxes or are you just gonna shove them out the airlock?"

Johnson scowled. "Oh shut up, you don't even have a name."

"So," Kelly smiled and leant on the railing in front of one of the massive windows of the Cairo, "you ever remember it like this?"

"Sometimes." Standing next to her, John 117 smiled slightly.

Far beneath them, the Earth turned slowly.

The sunlight flashed off its seas, turning them incandescent and glinting off the continent of Africa, lighting up the area of glassed earth like a jewel.

Kelly heaved a sigh, shoulders slumping like the whole of the world were resting on them. "It's terrible isn't it, what they did?"

"Hmm?" John followed her gaze to the gleaming area surrounding the former New Mombasa. "They didn't really have much choice. It was that or let our entire planet succumb to the Flood. What would you have done."

Kelly closed her eyes and murmured, "that wasn't quite what I meant." She turned and gave John a half-hearted smile. "Does dire need really justify any act no matter how horrendous?" She reached over and clasped the back of his hand. "What are you thinking John?"

The Master Chief answered unhesitatingly. "If we'd been able to intercept the Flood controlled ship we might have destroyed it before it ever made it to Earth. Might have spared us half a continent."

Kelly nodded. "Thought it might be something like that. Johnâ€|Iâ€|"

"Ma'am?"

Kelly and John glanced up.

A marine was standing behind them, shifting from foot to foot nervously. "Uhâ€| Commander Roderick wants to see you Miss Kelly."

Kelly narrowed her eyes. "It's Spartan 087." She let go of the Chief's hand and straightened up. All trace of humanity seemed to drain out of her as a glint lit her eyes like the death of stars.

She turned and threw a salute at John. "Goodbye, sir."

John nodded and returned the salute stiffly.

Kelly strode away, leaving the marine to scurry along after her with a nervous backwards glance.

John watched her go impassively.

After a few moments he turned back to the window.

A faint buzzing from his right made him twist around.

Cortana was staring at him with her arms folded across her chest, from a nearby console.

John matched her stare for several seconds before cocking an eyebrow. "What?"

Cortana grinned. "You doofus." She vanished with a faint purple flash, leaving the Master Chief alone, lit up from behind by the light of desecrated Earth.

12. Jiralhanae

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

Exclclaimer: I may be pushing it a bit with this chapter, I'll just have to see how it all pans out. Take it or leave it.**
>

****Jiralhanae****

"Alas, my Brothers, this is a most grievous affair."

Zealot Taso 'Ratanalee gave a sigh and slumped into his control 'throne.'

The bridge of the _Veiled Shade_ was all but empty, save for half-a-dozen Elites.

With his arms folded over his chest, the Councilor Fuka 'Hyoronmee sighed. "You couldn't have picked a worse time to be charitable, it is true. You're efforts were commendable though. Misplaced, yet commendable."

"Glad to hear it." The Arbiter, staring into space and flicking his energy sword on and off compulsively, scowled. "I'd love to enthuse more, but all I can see is this impinges on my duties more so then usual. Are you intending that Iâ€| babysit?"

"No need to be so crass about it." Snapped Fuka, "but yes, I believe that is the vague idea."

The Arbiter glowered at Fuka, "terrific, shall I begin my celebrations now or save it for _after_ I honorably disembowel myself?

"No one likes a sarcastic holy warrior." Fuka turned back to the assembled "This event must not become known to the masses. It will be _bedlam_. My brothers," he spread his hands in a supplicating gesture, "understand, things are stretched thin enough as it is, with the human's _Prime Minister_," he spat the words like a curse, "and the ever-present threat of the Covenant Day celebrations (I trust you know what will happen when that day bares its fangs). The humans do not trust us, they still hold the past too dear, if they even learned of thisâ€|"

"I hardly think concealing it will encourage particularly good feelings, do you?" The Arbiter sneered. "Perhaps as a gesture of goodwillâ€|?"

"Goodwill?" Fuka gaped, "have you taken complete leave of your senses Arbiter? What possible good can be derived from this situation, hmm?"

Taso rubbed his temples, "oh were I able to go back on my actionsâ€|"

> "No!" Fuka hissed. "The Covenant was not founded on mistakes! Regardless to how this appears it is more a blessing then how things could have went."<p>

"Understandable." Standing at Taso's right hand, Rtas 'Vadumee grunted. "The designs of the Forerunners cannot be interpreted by mere discussion. This event may yet pan out into a more fortuitous circumstance then we could have hoped. Or notâ€|" He let the sentence

hang in the air.

"Quite." The Arbiter frowned. "Rtas, do you fear sometimes that the Forerunners are 'messaging with you?'"

"Say that again Arbiter," Rtas snarled, "and I'll make sure they brand you in a very inconvenient place."

"I could not think of a place more inconvenient than this." The Arbiter stretched awkwardly. "Oh blast, I suppose I'd better run a flea bath for the new pets. Enjoy the rest of your day gents." With a jaunty salute he strode off, hooves tapping out a symphony across the metal floor.

Fuka cocked a brow-ridge at his departing back. "Tell me brothers, do you ever think the Arbiter isâ€¦ spending a little too much time among the humans?"

Taso smiled innocently at the ceiling. "Oh, then he's definitely due for a very interesting time todayâ€¦"

Miranda Keyes barely looked up from her notes as the door of her office hissed open.

"Ah, Master Chief, good to see you. And on time too." She carefully folded the paper and slipped it into an envelope. Seemingly ignoring the Master Chief, waiting at attention in the doorway, she signed her name in neatly flowing script and held it out.

A couple of seconds later, a guard robot unfolded itself from the wall and took it carefully between its inch-thick fingers. "To Lord Hood." Miranda enunciated carefully.

The robot let out a grunt and knuckled off.

"Right," Miranda sat back when the doors had hissed closed behind it. "At ease Chief."

"Ma'am." The Chief remained as he was. "You wanted to see me?"

"Sadly, yes." The Commander gave him a weak smile. "You realize of course that I hate to intrude on yourâ€¦ duties."

"Yes." The Chief decided not to comment on the overextended pause.

He glanced around at the sound of shuffling, and caught sight of two haggard attendants sitting behind a desk. They gave him a despairing look.

"We've been busy." Said Miranda dismissively. "Wellâ€¦ I say busy but I mean, 'worked out of our tiny minds by a skinny little paranoid desk-jockey intent on disrupting everything we've been working towards with his constant whining tirade and neurotic attempts at dragging our honorable Sangheili cousins endeavors at affability

through the mud.' "

The Chief nodded non-committedly, "yes Ma'am."

Miranda arched an eyebrow but continued anyway, "I'm sure you know how hard we've been working with the Elites to attempt to secure bonds of friendship."

"Not an easy thing to miss, no."

"Yes, well," Miranda swung out of her chair irritably, "then it might interest you to know that they are hiding something from us."

"Yes, Ma'am." The Chief frowned, "why would that interest me?"

"That's not important," Miranda snapped, "what is important, however, is that if the Prime Minister thinks the aliens are keeping secrets from him then he may cancel his trip to Sanghelios. This should not happen. As it is right now, he currently wants the planet scoured for assassins, a marine posted in every tree and an armed guard of a dozen Spartans." She sighed. "Well, that's what it's going to be by the end of the week at this rate."

"Yes, Ma'am." The Chief turned a calm stare on the Commander. "I see this affects me quite severely."

Miranda glowered at him. "Is that sarcasm Chief? Feh, never mind," she snapped as the Chief looked about to speak again, "Master Chief, you know I despise the idea of spying. But I need to know what's going on among the Covenant if we are to make any headway. I need you."

"Why me?"

Miranda snorted. "Why? Chief, you're the one that's always skulking around the Covenant ships."

"I don't skulk."

"You're the one who's friends with the Arbiter."

"I wouldn't say we're friends."

"And you're the one that the Covenant actually respects. Haven't you realized Chief?" She spread her hands in a supplicating gesture, "the Covenant still call you Demon as a mark of admiration. They think you're the closest thing we have to an Elite, if they won't tell you what's going on, then they won't tell anyone. Chief, I'm not asking you to spy. Not exactly. I just need you to ask around a bit, see if you can't get the Sangheili to tell you what's going on on their own."

"I doubt that."

"Admittedly," Miranda snarled, "but it's our best shot." She turned to the attendants. "I have had no sleep in three days and little to eat, so someone better get me a coffee and something low-fat, sticky and in bar form!

NOW!"

Grae 'Negrulee was not a happy Sangheili.

As Taso 'Ratanalee's personal concomitant, he was used to considerably more than his rank as a Major generally allowed. Right now, however, this was not the case.

He'd been banished from his master's side, turfed out of his ship and hadn't been given a single reason why other than 'Fuka says.'

And now he had to contend with the Demon.

He pressed his back firmly against a wall and saluted amateurishly. "Sir." He hissed through gritted mandibles. "You are passing through, yes?"

John 117 cocked an eyebrow at the grimacing Elite. He was wearing basic military uniform, taken out a bit to accommodate his seven-foot frame. "Yes. To the Veiled Shade. Is there a problem?"

The Elite looked wretched. "Can't let you pass I'm afraid. Orders."

"Really," John calmly motioned around them at the crowded hanger, "so all these Phantomsâ€¦"

"Not flying today."

"That so?" John glanced around, and his gaze happened upon the shape of a nearby Sangheili slinking towards a Phantom in a distant corner of the bay. "Right," he smiled brightly, "not a problem."

He saluted the cringing Elite and strode away.

Behind him, Grae breathed out a sigh of relief.

Moving with a stealth that was disproportionate to his size, the Chief easily slipped into the under-shadowed Phantom, past the other haphazard guards.

Swinging up through the main entrance portal with simian grace, he landed heavily and peered around.

The Phantom was all but empty, save for the Elite he'd seen earlier, hunched closer to the wall than Grae.

The Chief nodded greeting, "this ship heading to the Veiled Shade?"

The Sangheili gave him a look of hollow despair and murmured, "yes," in a tiny voice. It was clearly a civilian, or at least in civilian-wear, and slightly shorter than usual for its species.

It huddled closer into the wall at the sound of approaching footsteps and began to murmur a quiet prayer.

John regarded it with a worried frown, "you okay?"

The Elite, if anything, huddled even closer to the wall.

With a faint pattering, a green-armored Unggoy toddled awkwardly past the Chief, throwing him a cheery wave.

It wandered to the cockpit and swung itself into the pilot's chair.

The Elite let out a moan.

"Uhâ€|" John glanced from one to the other. "Are you theâ€| co-pilot?"

The Unggoy let out a high-pitched giggle. "Co-pilot? What that?"

Before John could retort, it repositioned the seat and grasped the steering mechanism. "Aliens and Gentlemen," it declared happily, "this your pilot Spequo, hoping we have safe flight today. Please keep arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times or get splattered. Keep seatbelts buckled untilâ€| oh, sorry, there no seatbelts. If ship begins death roll towards nearest sun, feel free to pray to deity of choice. Do not disembark until the pilot tells you to or we all about to die, then, your choice. Now," Spequo grinned behind his methane filter, "let's race some stars!"

The Elite across from John began to rock back and forth, emitting small whimpers.

John sank grimly down to his backside and braced himself.

Generally, Phantoms allowed for such a smooth flight that one could remain standing the entire time.

Something was telling the Spartan this was not, currently the case.

Fuka 'Hyoronmee scowled at the sound of approaching hooves.

"Arbiter?" He glanced over his shoulder, "what are you doing here?"

The Arbiter grunted, "need more blankets, the savages are revolting."

"Tell me something I don't know." Fuka gave a derisive wave at a nearby Zealot. "Tell the attending staff we need more blankets. The _Arbiter_ commands it."

"No need to sound so derogatory," muttered the Arbiter as the golden Elite strode away. "I'm only doing my duties, which if you'll recall you appointed of me."

"And you haven't thanked me once." Said Fuka dryly.

"I'll be sure to when I have time," said the Arbiter with mock cheeriness, "but for now I have to get back to workâ€|" He glanced around suddenly.

John 117 was standing just behind him, with a glazed, hollow expression.

"By the Forerunners Demon!" Exclaimed the Arbiter. "What happened to you?"

"Nng." John croaked.

"Evidently," crooned Fuka. He turned to the Arbiter and hissed, "what is he doing here? I thought we'd banned humans from the ship!"

"Clearly the Master Chief has once again proven more than human for the task." Said the Arbiter. "How unfortunate."

"Remove him!" Spat Fuka.

"Indeed?" The Arbiter scratched his nose thoughtfully, "or perhapsâ€| not."

"Arbiterâ€|" Fuka warned.

"Great and noble Councilor," said the Arbiter soothingly, "think for a moment, and considerâ€|" He leaned over to the approximate region of Fuka's ear and muttered something.

"You what!?! " Fuka snarled, "Arbiter this is the most recklessâ€|!"

The Arbiter whispered something else.

"Ridiculous!" Fuka snorted. "You mean to tell meâ€|!" He seemed to realize he'd raised his voice and finished in a murmur.

The Arbiter groaned and clapped a claw over his eyes. "Taso!" He roared, waving vaguely at the Zealot.

Taso 'Ratanalee, leaning against a wall ten or so meters away, trotted over and joined in the furious whispering.

After a few minutes, Fuka flung his hands in the air, defeated. "Fine! But both of you understand if this should go_Yanta_-shaped then be it all on your heads!" With a haughty glare shot in the direction of the Master Chief, Fuka stalked away.

The Arbiter and Taso watched him go with mixed expressions. "In times such as these," said Taso, "it is not at all fortuitous to be a Councilor. Most distressing." He wandered away in the same direction as Fuka, nodding pleasantly to John as he departed.

The Arbiter and John remained the sole occupants of the room.

"Alas Demon, you have caught us at a weak moment." The Arbiter raised his brow ridges conspiratorially. "We have hadâ€| much to concern us." He whipped his neck around, glancing in every direction before loping towards a darkened corridor, motioning John to follow. "You

are lucky, Demon, we had not intended to reveal this to anyone so soon, but time isâ€| running out. I need to gauge a reaction and yours will be perfect."

"That right, huh?" John glanced around at the scarce flickering lights dotting the walls. "What's this big secret then?"

"Ahâ€|" The Arbiter paused at a door at the end of the hall, and grimaced. "It is more than that, Demon, no one bar a group of select Sangheili, the Prophet of Wonder and a few cooking staff have any idea what lies beyond this room." He smiled slightly at John's perplexed look, and tapped a code into the doorway's console.

The door hissed open.

John was nearly blown off his feet by the sudden stench that rolled out, engulfing Spartan and Elite in its fetid waves. He'd endured smells like this before, but he'd always had his helmet on to mitigate the effects. Now it wasâ€| vile. "Arâ€| Arbiter?" He struggled not to gag as another wave hit him like a wet throw rug. "What is all thisâ€|?"

The Arbiter made a shushing motion as the door closed behind them.

He stuck two fingers in between his mandibles and blew out a sound that gave the impression he'd just expelled a wave of flatulence into a trio of maraca players.

"What was that all about?" Hissed John.

"Can you whistle, Demon?"

"Yes," John looked perplexed.

"Well," the Arbiter grinned sickeningly, "we can't."

From up ahead came a distinct snuffling noise.

"Arbiter?" John backed away cautiously as a shadow sprouted across the wall. "Whatâ€|?"

With heavy footsteps, it's claws clanging on the metal turf and deep wet breaths supplementing every stride, a Brute stomped around the corner towards them.

With instinctive military precision John ducked down into a half-crouch, fists raised accordingly slightly out from his chest, eyes never leaving the massive creature once as it paused a little way away from the two.

"Now Demon," chided the Arbiter, shaking his head, "control yourself and show some decorum. Thisâ€| is our secret."

The Jiralhanae shambled over, and bent down so its head was level with John's.

It sniffed cautiously and looked him up and down, lips peeling back from its fangs in a half-snarl.

"Now, now," the Arbiter snapped, "what did I tell you about that?"

The Brute cast him an irritable look and reared up.

To John's immense surprise, it knuckled its forehead in a clumsy salute and growled, "salutations human it is a pleasure to have you aboard our vessel." It sat back on its haunches, looking proud.

"Yes yes well done," sighed the Arbiter, "Demon, this is Sphinx."

John grunted non-committedly and took a closer look at the beast.

It was brown-furred and wearing some kind of coarse, rust-colored robes, while a bunch of greasy dreadlocks hung down from its skull. It was unarmed, but for a creature that could behead a man with its bare hands this was no real comfort.

Always one to notice the little things, John saw its tusks were also smaller than most he'd seen on Brute warriors and, now he recalled, there was something about its voice—something lighter-pitched and not nearly as gruff. It was almost as if—

"Arbiter." John hissed out of the corner of his mouth, "is this a female?"

To his annoyance, the Arbiter burst out laughing, "oh well done Demon! It took me much longer to work that out when I met her. Ah, Sphinx," he turned to the Brute, "this is the, ah, Demon."

"Hrrmph." Sphinx growled, starting to circle John thoughtfully, "you're lying. Everyone knows the Demon's bigger."

"It's the armor," said the Arbiter soothingly, "it makes things seem—"

Sphinx shoved her face close to John's and snarled, "his eyes don't glow! Everyone knows the eyes of the Demon burn like the heart of a furnace!"

"Only on the inside," said the Arbiter dryly.

"'The blood of my people seeps through his fingers,'" Sphinx spat, "this is but a human!"

"Indeed?" The Arbiter cast John a sideways glance, "as you say so, Sphinx."

The Brute gave John a scornful look, then lumbered over to the Arbiter, "why have you brought this worm into our midst?"

"Oh, for the experience, of course." The Arbiter beamed, "I trust we're not interrupting anything."

Sphinx looked awkwardly at her feet. "We were about to eat."

"Splendid." The Arbiter clapped his claws together, "I reckon we've been to enough banquets recently to tell this is going to be a lot of

funâ€| "

"Arbiter!" John hissed.

Striding along beside him, the Arbiter appeared not to notice.

"Arbiter!" John snarled, elbowing the Elite roughly. "Answer me!"

"Hmm?" The Arbiter glanced around like he'd noticed John for the first time. "Yes?"

"Are thereâ€|" John glanced around, noting the back of Sphinx plodding along ahead and lowered his voice furtively. "How many Brutes are there?"

"Ohâ€|" The Arbiter waved a hand vaguely, "you knowâ€| a numerous quantity. Many in the sense of our previous number of zero equivalent, but fewer then there, in fact, are."

"How many, exactly?" John growled.

"â€|Lots."

Sphinx snorted, "we few are theâ€| living. Our kindred, I fear, still dwell among the dead."

"Brutes have no word for traitor," the Arbiter murmured, "the closest is 'deceased.'"

"Fascinating." John looked the Arbiter up and down. "What did you die of?"

"Insolence will get you nowhere."

"And a thick ear." Grunted Sphinx.

"Yeah." John glared around. "Terrific."

Numerous Brutes leered at him as the little troupe passed by.

A couple of small Jiralhanae gave him a doleful look, as Brutes similarly-clad to Sphinx folded their arms and watched the human with their teeth.

Several Sangheili, Zealots and Councilors all of them, lingered by the numerous entrances, holding their weapons in an easy-going way that nonetheless held the promise of use.

"Precautions." Muttered the Arbiter, while Sphinx growled.

"Huh. I wonder why." The Chief paused as a group of Brutes lumbered over and stared at the newcomers.

The largest of them halted before Sphinx and started snarling at her in its guttural language, as Sphinx responded in kind. After a few

moments of heated conversation, the Brute peered over Sphinx's shoulder and blinked at John.

Then it started snickering.

> Sphinx bellowed something else and slammed her paw into the side of the other Jiralhanae's head.<p>

The stricken creature rocked back on its hind legs for a moment, before staggering away.

"They don't believe you either Arbiter," growled Sphinx over her shoulder, with a sideways glance at John.

"Tell them all to take it or leave it." Snapped the Arbiter irritably. "For this is the Demon, as to whether you shall heed my words, wellâ€¦ it is no quibble of mine should you prove as blind as Tartarus."

To John's immense surprise there was a sudden collective roar from the nearest Brutes, and the startled Elites half-raised their weapons.

Sphinx rounded on the Arbiter, looking fit to berserk. "That name holds no sway here and neither is it welcome!" She bellowed.

The Arbiter didn't even flinch in the face of her wrath. "Merely an observation my dear _Aureauk_." He smiled pleasantly. "If you intend to deny his lineage among your species then so be it, but I would not pretend altogether blameless in your own deeds, hmm?"

"Why the animosity?" Hissed John, trying to keep all the Brutes in his line of sight.

"A fewâ€¦ ill-advised decisions on his part may have impacted negatively on the Jiralhanae civilian populace." The Arbiter was meeting Sphinx's glare, unblinking. "Words may have been said aboutâ€¦ things."

"What things?"

"Faith and some such." Said the Arbiter pointedly. "As the Prophet's little pet he sought to stamp out one or twoâ€¦ beliefs. Certainly his words may in particular have harmed the _Aureauks_ like Sphinx here."

"_Aureauks?_" John managed a scowl at the Arbiter, "what are they."

"All in due course Demon," said the Arbiter enigmatically, "first if could lower our weapons please."

Sphinx hesitantly lowered her paws to her sides and, as if on cue, the rest of room relaxed again.

"Tell us how you slew him again." Sphinx gave the Arbiter a sullen look.

"Ran him through with my blade," the Arbiter beamed, "with, of course, assistance from my loyal brothers," he spared the other Sangheili a nod, "and the ever-present Sergeant Johnson."

Sphinx grunted, seemingly satisfied. "He never did trust the _Aureauks._"

"There's that word again." John sighed, glaring at a couple of Brutes until they looked embarrassed and shuffled away. "Care to explain?"

"When we are ready Demon," said the Arbiter, to an accompaniment of snorts from the Jiralhanae.

"Right," John glowered at Sphinx then turned to peer among the ranks of Brutes. "Where's the Chieftain then? I want him where I can see him."

"Ah," the Arbiter held up a claw, "now that is an interesting storyâ€|"

As far as the Master Chief understood the facts, as they were relayed to him over dinner, they were this;

The Brute ship had turned up one day and was happened upon by Taso 'Ratanalee's vessel, the _Veiled Shade_, while on a routine scouting mission.

Shaky negotiations had begun after Sphinx pleaded parley with the Elite Zealot, a suitably un-Brutish move that managed to pique the Sangheili's interest. They'd been taken aboard, a whole district from the doomed High Charity, and stood in an impromptu court. Despite considerable effort, no fault could be found in the in the Jiralhanae, so they were reluctantly accepted aboard.

Then was the problem of the Brute Chieftain.

Or lack thereof.

The usual practice would've been to detain the Chieftain in a holding cell as a measure of the Brutes good faith and a means to keep them quiet.

But all they seemed willing to offer as a leader was Sphinx, and the first attempt to incarcerate her made it clear that there would be bloodshed over _that_.

So Sphinx, in proving that beneath her dirty dreadlocks there dwelt the mind of a diplomat, appointed her own Chieftain.

The Arbiter.

"It was a less complicated decision then I had assumed." The Arbiter sat back holding a glass of fruit drink between his claws. "I'm realistically hardly even above an Unggoy because of this," he jabbed at the approximate region of the Mark of Shame, "so I'm non-threatening. And I've killed a lot of Brutes. For some reason that makes me quite important in their eyes. I've yet to fathom why."

"So they made youâ€¦ their Chief?" John stared around at the feasting Brutes.

They were crowded around a roughly hewn table (probably from a whole tree if John was any judge) eating bowls full of varying bloody meats (though only by degrees seeing how theâ€¦ things they'd piled on seemed more inclined to slide onto the table) with intense gusto (nothing shows gusto like a large hairy creature with jaw that distends more impressively than a snakes).

"Chieftain is an interesting concept." Said the Arbiter pointedly. "The Chieftain's primary goal being to speak for his tribe and settle disputes. This generally means that when two Brutes start to argue, they are unduly knocked unconscious and the first to awaken is the one proclaimed 'in the right.' Sphinx does that and I handle the conversation." The Arbiter toyed with a bone on his plate and tore off a strip of rare meat, swallowing with audible signs of discomfort. "Eugh," he put a hand to his mouth and made a gagging noise, "I'm sorry Sphinx but that isâ€¦ just revolting."

"What is Sphinx?" John leant over and gave her a baleful look. "What made her more important to her people than a Chieftain?"

"Ah," the Arbiter set the bone down and pushed his plate away. "That is, of course, where the _Aureauk_ comes in."

"Really?" John narrowed his eyes, "I would never have guessed. And, forgive me, what would that be again?"

The Arbiter leered at John and gently took a nearby Brutes mug. A visible haze hung over it and the Arbiter wafted it under his nose. "Jiralhanae whisky." He explained, passing it back, "clears out every sense bar touch." He waved his hand in front of his face and flexed his fingers, "ah, scratch that." He glanced back at John and saw him still glaring. "Oh blast it Demon, very well. Sphinx," he barked, "show him."

The Jiralhanae calmly picked up her own mug and drained it with aggravating torpidity.

She set it down, then rose to her feet.

All nearby Brutes paused in their feeding and leaned forward with worrying eagerness.

Sphinx tugged at the robe, slipping it partway off her shoulders and whirled around with surprising elegance.

As the red material fell away, the fur across her back was revealed. Though standard brown for the most part, a thick stripe down between her shoulder blades to the small of her back was pale gold, coated with some kind of tallow to make it stick up like a blond porcupine.

There was a collective sigh from the Brutes.

"Soâ€¦" John scowled. "She's got yellow fur?"

All heads slowly twisted in his direction, Sphinx whirled around tugging her robe back into place.

A few of the Brutes snarled.

The Arbiter coughed. "Close Demon, but I fear you mock their faith." He gently nudged Sphinx back into her seat. "Tell me, have you ever seen a gold-furred Brute before?"

"Wellâ€¦ no, butâ€¦"

"No but, indeed." Interjected the Arbiter, "this is because there are not, in fact any golden Brutes remaining. Moreover in all their law there has only been one case of such a thing."

The Jiralhanae slunk back into their seats, turning now with intent looks towards the Arbiter.

He coughed again, "yes, the first, and only, golden Brute is known as Auur, and he (or she) is said to hold his (or her) final resting place under a large mountain of yellow rock on the Brutes homeworld. Unfortunately, the Jiralhanae guard the place jealously, so we've never ascertained what it was composed of, but they believe it is solidified fur, that has grown ever sinceâ€¦ well, ever since the Halo's were first activated."

John snorted. "That's ridiculous."

"Notâ€¦ entirely. Does not hair grow after death?"

"Not for that long." John glared at Sphinx. "I'm not really one for old legends."

"A pity," the Arbiter snapped, "because, they areâ€¦" He nodded in the direction of the dozen-or-so Brutes glaring daggers at John. "Listen Demon," he leaned forward, "Auur is not a deity. Notâ€¦ exactly. He (or she) is likeâ€¦ a representative for the Brutes as a race. What his (or her) beliefs are, so too are theirs. According to Brute legends, that existed even before their formation in the Covenant, Auur originally served aâ€¦ higher power. Some grand masters that allowed for Auur to bring forth his (or her) own race of favored ones that would survive long after theâ€¦ well, they call it 'The Desolation.'"

"Okay," John snorted, "this sounds way too familiar."

"Exactly," the Arbiter spread his arms, "so how easy was it for the Prophets to engulf the Brutes in our faith? To make them theirâ€¦ anointed." The last word came out as a hiss, clearly the Arbiter was still sore somewhat over the Prophet's betrayal.

"Right, so then these Brutes," John nodded at the assembled, "are following Sphinx rather than listening to all that crap then?"

There was a sudden resounding thud as every bit of meat or clay mug hit the table.

The Brutes turned on John a look so fierce that he could almost feel his eyebrows crisping with its intensity.

No berserking, Fuel-rod-armed or Gravity-hammer wielding Jiralhanae had every consecrated so much hatred into one small area.

John carefully picked up his own black-clay mug and held it in front of his face like a shield.

Sphinx was quivering with indignation and even the Elite guards were watching him with gaping mandibles.

The Arbiter let out a long drawn-out sigh, breaking the grisly silence. "One faux pas too many, I think."

"Mmf." John attempted to absorb himself in the markings on the clay mug.

> "Understand, of course," the Arbiter leaned over and muttered, "Aur is very much a permanent part of Brute society. However his (or her) messages are to be interpreted by the Aureauk's is their business, but wellâ€¦ Whatever Aur believes so too do they."

"Do I apologize?" John whispered back.

The Arbiter shook his head, "a move that may result in you having your head torn off. Better to claim ignorance and be labeled a fool then to accept that you knew you were in the wrong and die a painful death. Ask about the pottery."

As the Arbiter moved away, John cleared his throat awkwardly. "These areâ€¦ uhâ€¦ interesting markings." He held the mug up. "Clan based?"

Sphinx snorted, but couldn't help the smile starting to tug at the corners of her mouth. "They are the inscriptions originally belonging to my two-and-six-tenth grandsire. They state the important events of my family and note our common strain of _Aureauks_."

"Oh," John nodded slowly, still not entirely comfortable with the dive into a domestic setting, "it'sâ€¦ very nice clay."

Sphinx opened her mouth but the Arbiter interjected, "of course. All the best clay comes from the Jiralhanae furnaces. Why I myself haveâ€¦ had a fine collection. Only made of the finest _Gurruck_."

John nodded and raised the mug to his lips, hoping the Brutes were suitably calmed down.

"That is of course the finest, aha," the Arbiter leaned closer, an unpleasant smile twisting his mandibles, "Brute dung."

"You smug bastard."

Collapsed in one of the Brutes soggy-mud-pile shaped seats, the Arbiter was happily entertaining a small Jiralhanae youth on his knee with a deactivated energy sword hilt. The creature batted at the shiny metal and the Arbiter smiled. "Amazing isn't it Demon? All my life I've hated Brutes and now I'm their Chieftan. And aren't they all so precious?"

"Don't dodge the question Assbiter."

"What question?" The Arbiter cocked a brow ridge. "You just called me aâ€|"

"Well you are." John snapped. "You could have told me."

"I could have, yes." The Arbiter admitted. "But my way was more fun. Besides, the Brutes loved your reaction. The way you just froze up made them forgetâ€| nearly every mistake you made."

"I don't make mistakes."

"Fine, you're just a twit then." Sprawled in another seat, Sphinx laughed. The Arbiter carefully handed the child to her and slotted the hilt onto his waist. "It was perfectly sterilized Demon. Nothing that goes into a Brute furnace comes out anything less than clean. And charred beyond recognition."

"Terrific." John sighed and glanced at Sphinx. "Listen, Arbiter?"

"Yes?"

"I reallyâ€| really shouldn't be here."

The Arbiter turned and stared at the surrounding Brutes.

Sphinx followed his gaze.

Two of the Jiralhanae were over by the main window, staring out into the depths of the stars. This may have been romantic were they not snarling at one another in tones that implied that swear-words were the mere tip of the iceberg and the word_Sangheili _seemed to be cropping up a lot. Another was rubbing the nose of its child into a pile of broken crockery.

One was hunched over some kind of pottery wheel surrounded by a cloud of flies.

"Really?" The Arbiter turned back. "Are you certain?"

"Arbiter." John gave a supplicating gesture. "I'mâ€| Dead. Miranda sent me to find out what you were keeping from the UNSC."
> "Indeed?" The Arbiter hefted his energy sword hilt again and held it in a loose easy grip. "Well, so betrayal then Demon? I'mâ€| surprised. You do realize what could happen if this gets out?"<p>

"Or what might not if the others can accept this as easily as I can." John and Arbiter matched aloof stares for several long seconds.

"Yes." The Arbiter scratched the end of his nose with the hilt for a few moments. "And you know the penalty for disrupting the peace among the Covenant?"

"I'm going to sayâ€|" John watched as the Arbiter began twirling the hilt with his claws. "A hefty fine?"

"Only the heftiest you will ever pay." The Arbiter slotted the sword onto his belt and sighed. "Oh Demon, whatever will I do with youâ€|?"

"Well, you're not going to kill me." John admitted. "Because if you tried it I'd be forced to shoot my way out of here or something along that trail of thinking. Also, I'm not going to tell anyone. Sphinx here," he waved vaguely at the Brute, who smiled at him affably for the first time that day, "may as well stay in the dark."

"Very good of you to say so Demon." The Arbiter bowed graciously. "Then what shall you tell your Commander?"

"Oh," John smiled faintly, "I'll think of something. Trust me."

Miranda sighed and drummed her fingers on her desk. "You did whatâ€| exactly?"

Looking unabashed before her, a guard robot knuckled upright and focussed its tiny eyes on the Commander. "Mis-placed the Let-ter Miss Keyes." It droned.

"Howâ€|?" Miranda groped for words to convey her feelings of shock and horror. "How?"

"Dropped it some-where."

"And you didn't pick it upâ€| why?"

"Can't re-mem-ber where Miss Keyes."

Miranda snarled and hurled a roll of tape at the automaton's boxy cranium. "Just get out of my sight! I've got a copy on my computer I'll take it to Lord Hood myself!"

The machine was simply silent and watched as the roll spun away into a corner of the room.

Then it simply gave a grunt of acknowledgement and knuckled away. The main door hissed open and it barged through, forcing the Master Chief to duck in under its arm.

He stood up and saluted. "Ma'am."

"Master Chief," Miranda rose to her feet with a grim smile. "Good to have you back. How was it?"

"Satisfactory." John strode over to her desk.

"Well now." Miranda spread her hands. "What have you brought me?"

John advanced towards her until he loomed over the desk. Miranda gave him a rueful smile. "Don't feel obligated Chief. I understand if you feel that what you found isâ€| sensitive. The Elites _are_ _our_ friends so ifâ€| you know, you have aâ€| problemâ€|" She trailed off

uncomfortably, "you don't have to say anything if you don't want toâ€|"

John was quiet for a few moments, as if waiting for her to continue. When she didn't he simply said, "my loyalties are to Earth and her colonies. It's my duty to defend her to the utmost."

"Very well," Miranda gave a half-relieved, half-nervous smile. "Go on please. What is the Elite's secret."

John took a deep breath, pausing as if in regret for half-a-dozen seconds. "The Arbiterâ€| The Arbiter's got herpes."

Silence enveloped the room for what felt like hours as Miranda gaped, dumbstruck at the Master Chief. Then, "come again?"

"The Arbiter," John carefully enunciated what accounted for fifteen minutes of careful study into an unknown field, "that is to say the holy warrior of the Covenant, has contracted an STD."

Miranda continued staring. "Really?" She managed weakly.

John nodded, "the Elites would rather not let anyone know that theirâ€| sacred hero is anything less thanâ€| that."

"I see." Lied Miranda. "This is very interesting."

John nodded gravely, "I hope you see why this information shouldn't get out too far. We don't want everyone to hear about our friends situation do we?"

"No." Miranda chewed on a fingernail thoughtfully, "so, don't tell Johnson?"

"Don't even _think_ it near Johnson." Agreed John.

"Of course." Miranda shot the Spartan a suspicious look but his expression was unreadable, "well then," she picked up a couple of papers and shuffled them awkwardly, "dismissed."

John nodded curtly, turned on his heel and stalked away.

When the door had hissed closed behind him he allowed himself a small smirk. "Well Arbiter, how's that for a shit-cup?"

13. Sidekicks

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

Exclainer: Following the events in the spin-off fiction, "Domestic Affairs Spog" by 'A Brick in The Wall,' Johnson, Lord Hood and Miranda now know about the Brutes.

Exclainer Part 2: A man and an alien walk into a barâ€|

****Sidekicks****

The interior of the 'Halo's Cessation' bar on Earth was half-shrouded in a fug of smoke, looming over the neatly arrayed pool tables like the mist off a bog.

The clink of glasses and quiet murmur of conversation were the only sounds that broke the all-pervading silence, as all the human occupants sought to enjoy a bit of free time in the most dismal way they could.

The main door at one end, Olde-style heavy oak with circular carvings, banged open.

Several casual drinkers looked around, and a barely stifled gasp of surprise welcomed the latest occupant.

It was a haggard Elite, clad in the armor of a Special Ops commandant. Two of its mandibles were missing, and despite the fact that it was unarmed numerous chairs were scraped back as people tried to distance themselves from the Sangheili.

Rtas 'Vadumee, known as Half-Jaw among his comrades for an apparently unspecified reason, trudged over to the bar and peered down at the barman.

"Good day human. I have had a Jiruuk of a day trailing around your icy planet after your government officials, and I use the term lightly, so I am in no mood to bandy words. Now, I would like to acquire some manner of human intoxicant, preferably made from fruit or honey, and I have easy means to pay you so be quick about it." Rtas drew himself up haughtily and glowered at the man.

The rotund bar owner gave the Elite a cool stare and stated, "no pets allowed in my bar."

"Why you insolentâ€|!" Rtas made a move towards the man but halted in surprise when a hand was thrust in under his own and grasped the barman by the front of his grubby apron, dragging him face to face with none other than Sergeant Major Avery Johnson.

As Rtas backed away, Johnson snarled at the cringing man, "alright listen up you porcine, malodorous, no hoper fat whiny little son of a bitch. While you were wasting away your fleeting years in this dingy little crap hole, my scaly friend over there was putting his ass on the line in front of slimy parasites and psycho panda-bears so you could keep on doing it! Now, you better hurry up and shout my scaly squid-faced buddy a drink before I get really mad. You hear me you little shit-cup?"

The man nodded madly and gibbered as Johnson let him drop. "Alright," he clapped a hand on Rtas' broad shoulder and carefully led the Elite over to a table. "Don't mind the garbage half-split-chin, you just stick with old Johnson and you'll be fine."

"Yes." Said 'Vadumee weakly as he was led over to a table near the bar. He sagged carefully into one of the seats and tried to make himself as comfortable as he could. "Glad you were here really, I would've hated to make a scene."

"Ah, forget about it." Johnson pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lit it with a candle off a nearby table, "I saw you trailing along

after the Councilors today and I thought to myself, boy there goes one pissed alien. And I was right, right?"

He gave 'Vadumee sideways glance. The Ship Master nodded, "yes, I'm afraid. And it doesn't get much better when I return home either, because I know the Prophet of Wonder's going to start whining about being left out of the negotiations and I have no idea how to break it to him that we trust him about as far as he can throw me."

"I thought so." Johnson grinned, "Well scaly if it makes you feel any better I'm not overjoyed myself." He swung back over to the other table and picked up a magazine, flipping it casually across to the Sangheili. "Guess what this is?"

"Pleasant enough in its way," Half-Jaw flipped through it, "though I don't see whatâ€|?" He turned it back to the front and stared. "I see."

Johnson gave a sickly smile. "Read it."

"'Our Heroes Return Home.'" Half-Jaw cocked a brow ridge. There was a clear picture of the Master Chief on the front with Lord Hood and Miranda receding into the background behind him. The Arbiter was just visible as a hunched shape in one corner, with a blue speck hovering above him indicating Guilty Spark. He peered closer. "Ah, and you areâ€|?"

"There." Johnson irritably rapped the magazine with his forefinger.

A curve of green fabric was barely visible on the side of the cover.

"That'd be me." Johnson growled. "Or a bit of me anyway." He tapped his shoulder,
> "notice the family resemblance?"<p>

"My word." Rtas breathed melodramatically, "it's uncanny, like you're actually here in the room with us."

"Put a lid on the crap 'Vadumee, you ain't even in it."

"Too true," Rtas pushed the magazine away and folded his arms. "But I do much prefer my movement to remainâ€| unnoticed."

"Then you're winning at least." Johnson entwined his arms behind his head as the barman crept over carefully with two pints. "Put em down," Johnson barked, "and walk away."

As the man complied, Rtas 'Vadumee lunged forward and grasped his arm, "and bring me a saucer," he rasped.

As the barman staggered away with a terrified glance at the two warriors, Rtas turned back to Johnson. "Your people still have yet to make a decent Sangheili cup I'm afraid." He said apologetically.

Johnson merely shrugged and took a long draught of his drink.

Rtas waited for several long moments before a saucer rattled and spun

across the table towards him. "Ah, excellent," he splashed a portion of his drink into it. "At last a bit of proper service."

"Oh that's Earth for ya." Johnson smirked around a moustache of foam. "Show a bit of kindness and the world's your oyster."

'Vadumee frowned, "You mean a snot-like little mollusk eternally dragging itself around by a foot and soaking up any scum that happens to be lying around?"

Johnson actually laughed at that, "yeah, somewhere along them lines. Cept under its tough shell there's always a pearl."

"Always the free-thinker you." Rtas saluted Johnson with his mug and smiled, "now, about this magazineâ€|"

"Forget it." Said Johnson taking another swig. "So what if I'm the Chief's little sidekick? Everyone knows it's the man behind the scenes running the play. The old Spartan's just for the crowds."

"As would beâ€| the Arbiter." 'Vadumee submerged his remaining mandibles in the saucer and drank noisily. When the last joyous slurp had died away he sat up, poured out another sample and drained it like the first. "Ah, smashing really. Glad to see something worthwhile's been grinded out of the planet. Oh, yes where was I?"

"The Arbiter?" Johnson prompted.

"Most respected position in the Covenant, everyone below the Councilors take their orders from him, and even theyâ€| well, they are swayed by _his _council. However, the Arbiter is a superfluous being really. Like a sword with a wicked edge, he is more then useful at the right time but nowadays there's more use in a Grunt sweeper."

"The Arbiter's got hands, he can hold a broom." Said Johnson brassily.

'Vadumee snorted, "let our holy slayer of Heretics and traitors mop up spills? Unlikely. Even I've had to do a bit of grunt work, but never his eminence. I suppose, therefore I am hisâ€| as you would put it, 'sidekick.'"

Johnson grinned. "Hurts, don't it?"

"Only my pride." 'Vadumee paused momentarily. "Ouch."

The two stared moodily into their respective drinks.

"I fear an increase in surplus is called for." Said 'Vadumee at length. "Barkeep! More intoxicants!"

Half-Jaw stared gloomily into his third drink as he drained it into his saucer. "Why is there a little worm in it?" He said heavily.

"Send it this way if you don't like it." Johnson grinned, his own third sloshing around in his grip.

"I wasn't complaining." Rtas drained the saucer, worm and all. "It's about time you humans got it right for once."

"Doesn't take much to make you happy hey half-face?"

"Meh," Half-Jaw emptied out the dregs into his saucer, "a little more kudos would not go amiss. Little over a couple of your weeks ago my brothers and I reduced a Brute stronghold to a pile of molten glass. The Arbiter simply blinks and a hundred wenches faint in ecstasy."

"Yeah, well," Johnson shrugged. "Some pick up line you got there; 'hey baby, I got glass.'"

'Vadumee grunted, "well yes, I suppose there is that. You know though, Johnson," Half-Jaw gave him a lopsided look. "Tell me, have you heard anything about the Arbiter and certain frivolities with a Miss Miranda Keyes?"

Johnson cocked an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"Unsure," 'Vadumee shook his head, "but rumors abound."

"Yeah," Johnson chuckled, "I spread most of em. Ah, forget about it half-face, I was making practice of my insatiable power over people. The Arbiter and Miranda were the pawns on my unholy chessboard. 'Cept I don't play chess, so call them the hanging paper people in my shooting range. I believe what happened, however," Johnson grinned at 'Vadumee's pained expression, "is Miranda saw the chance to take me down a peg or too and took it in the knowledge that the ramifications ensuing would happen to other people. Eloquent enough for ya scaly?"

"Pleasing to the ear, thank you." 'Vadumee engulfed his saucer. "Well that puts my mind at ease to a point, there was some strange hearsay circulating, you know how Hunters gossipâ€¦" He trailed off at Johnson's blank stare, "no you don't. I think we're stifling their creativity. They keep composing things into poems. There's one about me. I try not to listen." He coughed. "However, Councilor 'Hyoronmee will be very pleased to hear about that, he has been hypothesizing about it recently and this should relieve his curiosity."

"'Hyoronmee?" Johnson frowned. "That'sâ€¦ Fuku?"

"Close, but we pronounce it Foo-ka."

"Ah, right." Johnson stirred the dregs of his drink with his forefinger. "Now I'm wondering how long I have to wait until I get a refill!"

The barman breezed over with a scowl. "You gonna pay for this one?"

"Don't pay for garbage." Johnson waved the mug under his nose. "Remember who saved your ass. Let me give you a hintâ€¦"

"Forget it." The barman slouched off.

"Charming. Good help is so hard to find." 'Vadumee sighed. "Still, you've never been served by Eva when her kitchen staff are having a nervous breakdown. Truly aggravating."

"Fine, swap her carving knife for a gun and show her a good time on the battlefield. Couple of Brute scalps and she'll be happy with whatever she gets. Makes _me _glad to be anywhere, even a couple of centimeters of shirt on a magazine cover. I know Miranda'd rather sit around with her paperwork then knock the shit outta a pack of Jackals."

"Really? And where was said paperwork when last you saw it?"

"Last time? Stapled to the rump of one of her attendants." A foaming mug settled timidly in front of the Sergeant Major. "Yeah, okay it's not a foolproof system. Besides I know it's a certain kind of taboo or some crap for your girls to fight, right?"

"Supposedly." 'Vadumee shrugged. "Though Eva would, of course, fight like an over-excited Jiralhanae to argue a point. She seems to think of herself as some kind of zealous feminist historian, claiming that in our past our other halves did indeed fight alongside us. I have studied a great deal more history than her and I know that she is right. In a way."

"What, they fought part-time?"

"No, but there wereâ€¦ complications along the way to enlightenment." Half-Jaw leant forward conspiratorially. "Ever heard of the Grunt Rebellion?"

"Bunch of little buggers all scrabbling for some kudos? Most terrifying thing I've ever heard." Johnson grinned into his foam.

"Don't laugh, it really was." 'Vadumee warned. He sighed. "In those days life was hard for the Unggoy. They were little more than thralls for the Covenant, treated worse than animals. Sangheili were wont to carry them around like living shields, Lekgolo used to go out of their way to step on them, we used to send them in by their hundreds just to soak up the enemy ammunition. Finally something in them just snapped."

"So." Johnson shrugged. "You offer em better living conditions and a coupla days off a year and everything's dandy right?"

"Ahâ€¦ no. You see, all it took was one Grunt to realize that they had us under their complete dominion all along and all it took was the most miniscule effort from each Unggoy to cripple the entire Covenant. You don't understand, the Unggoy soldiers outnumbering us was only the tip of theâ€¦ theâ€¦ umâ€¦ the hugeâ€¦ icy thing most of which is submergedâ€¦?" He gave Johnson a pleading look.

> "Iceberg."<p>

"Right, yes, iceberg. One of those. It was the civilians that really held us in their grip. You see Johnson, they did everything for us. They cooked our food, minded our homes, watched our children! They

didn't even need to do anything, justâ€¦ insinuate. Needless to say an Arbiter rose to the occasion and took out the head of the Unggoy, reducing them to a semblance of docility. Certainly from that point on Hunters began watching where they put their feet. However, it was decided by the Sangheili Council that the Unggoy may have had a hint too much power over us. So some of us were required to take on non-military roles in a greater amount. Presumably, if my sources are right, it just started with a few of the females deciding to put down their weapons and picked up their sons. Eventually it reached the stage when they were _expected _to."

"Really." Johnson stared into his glass. "Heh, no wonder Eva hates ya."

"Oh no my friend," Half-Jaw gave a lopsided grin. "She likes _me_, it's the Arbiter she hates. And to be honest I'm not such a fan of the young holy warrior myself."

"What?" Johnson snorted foam. "Oh come on! I'm _entitled _to hate the bastard but he's your bloody friend!"

"Oh I have no quibbles with the superficially luckless failed Zealot forced to wear the armor, but the concept of the Arbiter was formed by the Prophets as their tool, there are practically strings going from each of his arms to the fingers of whichever deluded San 'Shyuum that somehow crawled their way into the thrones of the current Hierarchs. He is, therefore a symbol of every single way that the Prophets wronged us. However, aside from the ridiculous amount of hero-worship sent in his direction, the Arbiter is stillâ€¦ not a bad sort. I can respect anyone who can disembowel a Brute as quickly as he can."

"Ah why don't ya just marry him, you talk to much." Johnson glared at his quarter-full glass like it had personally offended him. "_We're_ the only ones that can commit an atrocity against mankind and call him a hero." He drained the glass and held it up. "Here's to you Master Chief," he slurred, "you unlucky bastard."

"Johnson," 'Vadumee smirked, "I think you've had a little much to drink."

"Son, you'lll _know_ when I've had too much."

"As will you, Iâ€¦ meâ€¦ youâ€¦ I too shall be known to have had too much to drink when you realize it." He covered this with a sip from his saucer, "I tend to spout out protracted speeches of varying relevance."

"Meh." Johnson eyed him thoughtfully for a moment. "Hey, on the subject of Elite girlsâ€¦"

"When did we say whatâ€¦?"

"That Tusa 'Falana," said Johnson hurriedly. "She's the sister ofâ€¦ Tasoâ€¦ 'Ratanalee?"

"Correct."

"Well, now I've picked up a bit from you guys so I know her family name's ana right? So how come it's different to 'Ratanalee's family

name?"

'Vadumee cocked his head on one side and gaped at him. "Why do you ask, this seems like a pointless query?"

"I'm currently lookin at the world through a brown wavy haze so right now I'm indifferent, so just answer the question shit-cup!"

"Very well, clearly you failed to master the complete principals of our naming rights, quite the shame because they are very important to us as a species. However, I will allow this two-hundred-and-ninety-eighth slip-up to pass. Ana is the feminine version of the family name, I think you'll find that in Taso's family it is only the males that are Anal."

He gave Johnson a self-satisfied look, only to see the man's face slowly tinting a shade of red. He got to silently to his feet, tapping a candlestick against his glass.

"Uhâ€¦ hi everyone, can you all just quiet down for a moment, I've got an announcement." He looked around at the blank faces. "Whoo, boy (who to thank, who to thankâ€¦) weeeell, I guess I oughta thank my parents; thanks ma, pop, you guys got me through some hard times. And well, I guess I'd better thank the big guy; thank you Chief. And of course there's Tasoâ€¦ ah you know what, just forget it all, Ratass you're the guy I really owe for all this, you're just great." He sunk back into his seat, "woo, first the herpes now this, this is gonna be a _fun _week."

"I don't understandâ€¦"

"Oh you will, gimme maybeâ€¦ oh, five-and-a-half days and everyone's going to know. Tell Tusa to take an extended leave of absence because, my squid-faced amigo, her brother's going to be purple for the foreseeable future. And yes, I do know you guys blush violet, or flush violet with anger hell, I don't know how he's gonna take it but it'll be good times on the _Veiled Shade_ for a while yet so don't you dare spoil this for me boy or I swear I'll show you things to do with an energy sword that you've never in your wildest dreams considered. And yes," he took a last drag from his mug, "now I'm drunk."

There was a faint _thunk_ as his forehead hit the table.

The barman slouched over and picked up the empty flagon. "So, no tip then?" Half-Jaw waved him away as the man set another one in front of the prone Sergeant.

"Well I guess that proves that size is directly proportional to durability in the face of alcohol." Half-Jaw grinned.

"Ship Master Rtas 'Vadumee!" 'Vadumee yelped at the sudden enraged howl.

He turned, catching sight of the lights gleaming off the grand Councilor armor of Fuka 'Hyoronmee.

The Elite thundered across the scuffed floor towards the Special Forces Commander, helm held high in haughty grandeur. He set his knuckles on the tabletop and leered down at 'Vadumee. "Well well, if

this isn't a pretty sight, the noble ship master tearing apart his few brain cells in a seedy bar on an poorly-evolved planet withâ€| thisâ€|" He gestured at Johnson. "I'm appalled. I've never yet witnessed the Arbiter in such a foul position."

"Oh Arbiter this, Arbiter that," 'Vadumee snorted. He kicked a chair towards Fuka. "Either join us or go away, you upset me."

"Only you 'Vadumeeâ€|" Fuka shook his head. "And yet you make a convincing argument. He swung into the seat, which creaked alarmingly. "Bartender, will I be receiving a vat of intoxicants or do I have to start glassing?"

14. Anthropomorphous

_Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe or Red vs Blue.
>

Arbiter: Hmm, that's strange.

nevar88: What?

Arbiter: You updated.

nevar88: Up yours Assbiter.

Exclainer: Yes there is an alternate Red vs Blue in this, but realistically I could argue that this fits in with the Halo canon. We all saw the Easter Egg, right? Right?

2nd Exclainer: I'm starting to dislike the Master Chief, he is getting very difficult to plot for.

****Anthropomorphous****

Coils of mist enveloped the halls, parting in a long wave to permit the passage of Spartan 117 the Master Chief.

With a long-barreled pistol slung carelessly over his shoulder, the dimly lit hallway began to take on an oppressive feel. The Chief paused in a corridor, listening to the muffled gunshots and curses in the background.

Suddenly, the fog billowed outwards a monster bore its way towards him. The Flood combat form reared, ready to strike the Chief down with all due force.

It growled, "gurgle, gurgle, squelch. Snarl, roar and hissing noises. Bleaaaah." Its shoulders suddenly slumped and it gave an angry sigh. "Master Chief this really is most demeaning, I could've thought of a hundred other things I'd rather be doing with my day off."

The Chief cocked an eyebrow behind his visor and tried to make out the figure in the mists. "Is thatâ€| Eva 'Embrax?"

"Oh well done _genius_." Eva folded her arms over her chest and stuck out her mandibles in a pout. The Sangheili girl was clad in a rough suit of green armor, resembling vaguely what was supplied to the

marines. A crude com-set was attached to her alien throat, and she carried a pistol similar to the Chief's own. A large heavy leather glove enveloped her left hand, jokingly referred to by marines as a Flood-mitt. "And what is your encore performance?"

"I was thinking of shooting you." The Chief glanced around. "Are you alone?"

"Is it _that_ obvious?"

The Master Chief sighed and shook his head. "I really hate to stress a point miss 'Embrax," he paused and glanced at the number on her chest, "sorry, Flood-form number 28. But you are supposed to be in a horde. I see you, however, are horde-less. Are you missing a point somewhere?"

"I'll give you point!" Eva waved the gun barrel threateningly under his chin.

"Try it," the Spartan snapped, "I'm a moderator, remember? They don't work on me."

"Really?" Snorted a new voice, behind the Chief, "well that's just bollocks."

He didn't even turn his head, "that's you O'Riley, isn't it?"

"Yep," behind him, Private O'Riley a.k.a. Flood-form number 5, holstered his gun. He was wearing an outfit similar to Eva, including the mitt. "How's it Chief?"

The Master Chief didn't reply, but simply glared into Eva's smirk. "Tactics," she admitted. "Good, no?"

"No." The Spartan casually raised his weapon and shot them both before either could react.

As the sensors in the armor picked up the invisible rounds from the gun, both sets froze up, pinning their respective users in place.

"Right," John swung it back onto his shoulder, "now when you can move again I suggest you both find a Flood host and go and terrorize a few marines, alright?"

He took Eva's glare as an affirmative, then stalked off, ignoring the violent cursing that followed after him.

"Very mean Chief," grinned a voice in his helmet, "number 28 is a volunteer after all."

"If they're not going to take this seriously." The Chief frowned, "what's the scores Cortana?"

"Red team up by seven points." Cortana drawled, "Blue team up on Flood kills though."

"Good." The Chief grunted. He halted as three Flood ran past him across another hallway, disappearing into the swirling clouds of mist.

"Scary enough?" Cortana quipped. When the Chief was silent she added, "I believe this was your idea after all."

"Bits of it." John admitted. "A hastily cobbled together go at enhanced training regimes."

"They all seem to be enjoying it." Cortana noted.

"They're not supposed to," growled the Chief bitterly. "We're supposed to show them what it's like facing the Flood and if they're just going to piss aboutâ€|!"

"Easy, Chief, easy," Cortana soothed. "They're mostly new recruits and bottom-scrappings anyway and, well, call this the beta test. I think team Red is all but completely Sangheili, just a bunch of the young ones trying to find out what we do all day."

"Nothing at this rate!" The Chief groaned, "what's Blue team."

"Humans." Cortana answered quickly.

The Chief was trained to judge expressions, and he could imagine Cortana's face was carefully blank. He would have turned and shot her a raised eyebrow if she had actually been visible. Instead he settled on a shrug which she hopefully felt, "what exactly do you mean byâ€| humans?"

"Oh, certifiably human," said Cortana hurriedly, "definitely human. Human to a fault, in fact."

"Whatâ€| faults?"

"Umâ€| have you ever heard of Private Lavernius Tucker?"

The Chief paused, "I've heard him mentioned somewhere beforeâ€|"

"Probably by half the girls on the Cairo." The Chief could actually here Cortana roll her eyes this time. "He's picked up five phone numbers off the Flood so far today. Only three of these are actually humansâ€|"

"I'm getting the picture now," the Chief shuffled awkwardly, worried about this latest foray into unfamiliar territory.

"And there's this other kid," Cortana continued, "Michael J. Cabooseâ€|"

"Enough!" The Chief shouted suddenly, "I've heard enough."

"But I never even told you what heâ€|"

"I know," the Master Chief scowled, "but Miranda has shown me the bill for damages in his name. She uses it to weigh down her desk."

"Whyâ€|?"

"Not you!" The Chief snapped. "The rest of them! I mean, half the Red team have knocked off for a smoke!"

"It's not a smoke actually," hummed Cortana quietly, "you see Elites have this thing that they chewâ€¦"

"The young, unintelligent types at least," Eva sneered. "What is it you want Demon, we're very busy parasites, completely swamped off our feet."

There was a murmur of assent from the other assembled Flood.

"I mean," Eva continued, "I assure you, marines do not terrorize themselves. Is there a reason you are here, or is there something you want?"

"No, right," the Chief's scowl faded, "in fact I've got something that may solve this littleâ€¦ situation. If I could justâ€¦"

"DEMON!"

Before John could finish his sentence a golden blur clamored down the hall towards him, swathes of artificial mist writhing in its wake. The thing slammed into the Spartan spinning him into a wall. The Chief thrust away with his hand, bringing up his gun arm only for his assailant to grasp his wrist and propel him bodily into the ground with a blow to the spine. The Chief rolled as he hit, but a heavy hoof thudded into his breastplate, delivering an effective stunning blow.

The muzzle of a gun hovered inches in front of his visor, and the Chief's gaze traveled up it to the grim face of Zealot Taso 'Ratanalee.

"Vengeance, Demon." He growled, and backed off, leaving the Chief to struggle back to his feet.

'Ratanalee stalked a few meters away from the Chief, watching him warily. The Spartan held out one gauntlet-clad hand. "You haveâ€¦ my package?" He wheezed.

'Ratanalee nodded and passed over a chunky paper bag that clanked as it hit the Chief's palm, before being deposited swiftly in a recess of the MJOLNIR armor before anyone could get a good look at it.

"Thanks." 'Ratanalee nodded curtly and sidled through the press of Flood, allowing one of his hands to trail across Eva's shoulders as he did so, eliciting a faint giggle from the young Sangheili woman.

The Chief waved wearily at his departing back. "Right, I'm going to scout out the current enemy positions, the rest of you take five. You deserve it."

He darted away, allowing the training of years to muffle his heavy steps.

The mists enveloped him, and he was gone.

Once the Chief was a good distance from the Flood, Cortana allowed her voice to filter through. "Uhâ€¦ Right. I'm sure I speak for myself and everyone else in your head when I say, what the hell was that all about?"

"Classified." The Chief grunted, absent-mindedly extending the radius of his motion-sensor.

"_Classified_." Cortana mimicked in a high-pitched voice, "that's Classified Ma'am to you bub." With a flickering in the corner of the Chief's HUD, the violet form of Cortana appeared onscreen. She seemed to have donned a suit of purple MJOLNIR armor for the occasion, sans the helmet. She was also wearing a fetching 'you can't hide anything from me, pal' frown, with her arms folded across her torso. "Let's break it all down and see what you're willing to tell me, alright? What was the wholeâ€¦ vengeance thing? And bear in mind that when your thick skull impacted with the turf it completely messed up my furniture arrangement. There are pillows _everywhere!_"

The Master Chief chuckled softly. "It's â€¦ game we play. Well, sort of a game. Call it an enhanced version ofâ€¦ uh, tag. Except we take it in turns to 'kill' one another. It's been going on pretty much ever since I knocked his glass eye out last Christmas."

"Guy holds a grudge, huh?" Cortana cocked her head on one side. "Okay then, part two. Are weâ€¦ working with the Flood now?"

"That's an affirmative."

"Since when?"

"Since they are the only disciplined fighting force in this whole place, that's _since_."

"But aren'tâ€¦ aren't you supposed to be a moderator?" Cortana flashed an innocent smile. "I don't believe ganging up on the 'humans' is part of the job description."

"Miranda wanted me to educate them. And that's something I plan to do."

"Educate? Or humiliate."

"Both, if there's time. The latter otherwise."

"Right," Cortana conceded, "now, _what's in the bag?_"

"â€¦Insurance of aforementioned goals."

Cortana stood quietly watching him, waiting for the Spartan to continue. When he silently refused, she nodded, "I take it you're not going to tell me then. Fine, I'm sure I'll know about it when the screaming starts."

"It's always worked in the past."

Cortana scrutinized the Spartan's face, then broke into a broad grin. "You're loving this, aren't you? Oh come on," she pouted as the Chief glared, "the thrill of battle and fierce stench ofâ€¦ decaying

soap-swept hallways? You wouldn't be the Chief without it would you? Else you're just little Johnny, a boy in a big suit."

"Boy?" John raised an eyebrow with a dry chuckle, "I am seven-foot you know."

"A big boy then. A big boy with a gun. A big boy with a gun, permission to drive a tank and a strong desire to be throttling someone, maybe."

"I don't like to throttle. Beat downs are much more satisfying."

Cortana continued to grin, "you're a fun date."

"That's stretching the term a bit." The Chief whirled around, gun half-raised.

Eva was crouching behind him with a sheepish look on her mandibles. "Hi."

"Just a little bit," Cortana sighed and shook her head. "We have a tagalong also, I see."

"I'm observing," Eva turned to the Chief, "I had assumed you intended to achieve an element of vengeance on the humans? Well, as the elected Flood matriarch I think it's my duty to attend."

"Elected?" Cortana scoffed, "what did you offer, free human offal to the victors?"

"To them go the spoils." Eva chimed. "I am no stranger to battle sequences you understand. Several Jiralhanae will testify to my prowess with a knife."

"I don't think looting corpses for Brute-fur tassels is quite the same thing as prowess." Said Cortana with mocking sweetness. "Besides, the tagalong doesn't get to speak."

"Follow closely and quietly." The Chief grunted, "don't give away our position."

Eva saluted with the mitt. "Right, Excellency."

Cortana closed off the open mike to speak only to the Chief. "Excellency? Flirtatious little beast isn't she?"

"She's just being polite, what's the problem?"

Cortana eyed him shrewdly, "don't know much about girls do you?"

"Spartan ones." Muttered John sullenly.

Cortana chuckled darkly. "Not as much as you think." She set her hands on her hips and studied the Spartan's war-hardened face. "Alright then Chief, since it's just the two of us, and I'm sure it's safe to say the extra baggage has been excavated from the conversation." She shot the unknowing Eva a dirty look. "Would you discuss our current standing, hmm?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I thought so," Cortana sighed, "Obsolete intelligence Chief, you are very dense."

"That's a veryâ€¦ AI term."

"I always thought dense was pretty human myself," said Cortana smugly.

"I meant obsolete. Look who's talking."

"Sometimes I have to be cruel to be kind," Cortana shrugged, "now then, if you are not obsolete then would you prove it to me?"

"I never denied what you said."

>Cortana huffed irritably. "Indulge me then. If this is the way the war ends. And I have defied Flood, and false Prophets. I am your bubble shield, I am your energy sword. I am the monument to all your sins," she beamed, the virtual flesh on her cheeks dimpling as she sent a playful spark of electricity crackling across the hapless Spartan. "And you miss me."

"What?"

"When they inducted me into the Spartan program they gave me a choice. Hang around with someone I'd never connect with. Or hang around with you. You're welcome, by the way."

"I feel privileged," grunted the Chief, "not many people are lucky enough to have strange voices in their heads telling them what to do."

"I don't tell you what to do! I forcefully suggest. Like I suggest we take immediate cover."

The Chief complied, Eva flattening herself in the shadow of a wall nearby.

Two Blue soldiers ambled past, so oblivious it was almost insulting.

Eva let out a long rattling hiss at their retreating backs, "I will feast on your bones," she snarled.

The Chief patted her on the shoulder in a placating gesture and motioned for her to follow him further up the hall.

"They've all fobbed off." Cortana sighed, "what a waste of resources."

"I will rectify that." The Chief promised, "just trust me."

"Why?" Growled Cortana irritably, "it's never worked for me before."

"Meaningâ€¦ what?"

"You always want me to trust you and still we end up getting shot at

by every man and his Grunt while we run like crazy over Flood-infested turf and end up facing off with a floating blue television running a constant repeat of the 'I love me show.'

"I thought you liked crazy."

"Oh I do love crazy. It's the trust I'm not very big on. Every minute alone with you is enough excitement to last a lifetime."

"Some call that my charm." The Chief halted against a corner and peered around.

Eva's head snaked across just above him and for a brief moment the Spartan, Sangheili and AI all held matching expressions.

"They're justâ€¦ standing around," Eva breathed, "like grubs for the snatching."

"Uh, Chief?" Cortana hazarded, "is what you have in that paper bagâ€¦?"

"Probably. You've worked it out?"

"I think I have an idea. When did you order them?"

"Shortly before we started the 'fight.' Just in case."

"Good call."

Eva's mandibles gaped and she pointed wordlessly further down the hall, where a couple of blues and a red Elite were engaged in a game of cards.

"Kind of spoils my beta I suppose." The Chief snorted. "Come on," he grasped her lightly by the back of her armor and half-led, half-dragged the unprotesting Sangheili back the way they'd come.

"I saw two of themâ€" She began.

"I know," soothed the Chief, "so let's handle it. My way."

[illegible]

Private Leonard Church rocked back on his heels, a faint smile tracing over his stubble-encrusted features. So far this whole thing had been one friggin' breeze. The Flood were culled, the Reds were a bunch of uninteresting alien pricks and Caboose had been tricked into thinking the inside of a nearby closet was somehow a component in becoming his 'best friend' and so far hadn't been seen in hours.

Yes, life was sweet.

So he was more than a little unsettled as the lights started to flicker.

With a hiss the halls hit a dim twilight, and the rising mist became

faintly tinged with green.

"What the hell?" Church's head snapped around, "alright, who's messing with the scenery?"

Away to his right, an ebony-skinned Private called Tucker rolled his eyes. "Get over it man, it's moodâ€¦ stuff." He grinned toothily at a nearby Elite, "so, where were we?"

He received a fist to his gut that forced him to his knees, "bug off you idiot, I'm a guy."

Church chuckled and leant against the wall, "well done for observancy Tucker, you made the team. I'll call you next time we need a sniper on lookout."

"Pissâ€¦ offâ€¦"

Church shook his head and peered out into the hallway.

He frowned, and raised a hand to his face.

His frown deepened and he moved it closer, until he could actually see it.

The mist swirled around him, closing in as the fog generators in the walls worked double-time.

"What theâ€¦?"

****The demise of all at last assured. The blighted rise and quell the pure.****

His head whipped around in horror as the rest of the blues and reds behind him began to murmur in consternation.

****Hope extinguished, doom unfolds. **The deadpanned voice crashed throughout the training arena. **The lie of life no longer told!****

Church let out girlish squeal as a dark form loomed out of the mist.

It was Eva. She grinned and tapped the mike at her throat. "Hello."

"Oh." Church sighed, "it's just you." He rolled his eyes. "Right, freeze me or whatever, it's not like I'm doing anything anyway."

"That's not my intent." Eva raised her Flood-mitt. A small circle of metal gleamed in the center. It should have been a simple sensor, utilizing the same technology as the guns. It was a great deal larger and had more wires.

She planted it softly against his chest.

Church smirked at first, then waves of electricity suddenly fizzed across his system, drawing a strangled scream. As he toppled backwards, Eva bounded over him and bore Tucker to the ground. She

struck his face with the mitt, drawing a yell of shock. "That's for groping me you little _Jiralhuun_! Zappy zappy zappy!"

Flood began to swarm out of the mist, falling upon the terrified soldiers as they scattered, choking screams spilling from the lips of the fallen.

The Master Chief stormed out of the fug, shooting down an unfortunate Red Sangheili as the giggly little girl from maintenance, equally clad in Flood-gear marched towards him with terrible purpose.

"You realize of course," piped up Cortana, "that this is at the far bottom end of the ethical scale?"

"Don't care." The Chief grunted. "Worth it."

He glanced down at Church as the man sat up woozily. He rapped him on the head with his pistol. "Not going to look at the Flood the same way again are you?"

"Whuh?" Church gave him a perplexed look, "yeah?"

"Mission accomplished."

Cortana laughed softly, "oh believe me Chief you are going to fry for this."

[illegible]

The Chief stood smugly outside Miranda's office. "I don't take my actions back you know."

"Of course not." Cortana sighed. "You're always right."

"You know what to expect, I'm a professional soldier."

"You are also completely crazy."

"Your point?"

"I like crazy."

"Thanks," the Chief gave a half smile, "I like the voices that appear regularly in my head telling me to hurt people."

"Now Chief," Cortana scolded, "there really was no call for that."

"I can't help it, you're worth the trouble." The Chief's face crossed with a look that could have been mirth, or for anyone who didn't know him then intense constipation. "By the way Cortanaâ€|?"

" Mmm? "

"I was quiteâ€¦ fortunate to have you."

"Thanks . "

The Spartan and AI both winced as a mechanical groan echoed beside

The janitor nodded.

The gentle Private's features suddenly creased in sudden unexpected anger and he stated, "you know what I hate more then babies, Mister Thesaupod? Authors that don't update on time."

The janitor stiffened, the mop freezing in his grip.

"_Are you janitorialling when you should be writing?"_

The janitor dropped the mop, realigned his cap to a jauntier angle and hurriedly high-tailed away back down the hall.

"_Running time!"_

15. Daniel Paxton

Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo universe.

Exclaimer: Politics, how tiresome. I'm not completely happy with this one, I can't shake the feeling that I've written too much and said too little. I'll leave it up to you to form your own opinions.

****Daniel Paxton****

If Lord Hood felt any emotion it was currently not displayed on his face.

Sitting at the head of a circular table, drumming his fingers distractedly against the fake woodwork, Terrance Hood was the picture of a man with too much on his mind.

Councilor Fuka 'Hyoronmee, sitting at Hood's right hand, wrinkled his mandibles irritably. "I don't care for the situation either I assure you, however I'm sure events should play out their course."

Hood spared him a glance. Where a lesser man would have gave a distracted, "hmm?" Lord Hood simply nodded. "Of course Councilor. And I thank you for your time."

"Iâ€| thank you." 'Hyoronmee smiled stiffly.

"However I would like to know one or two things though," Hood turned his full attention on the luckless Elite. "Why were there a dozen Unggoy asleep in the hallway for one thing?"

"Cones," said 'Hyoronmee weakly, "apologies but some of your marines made off with the orange cones for some manner of boot-sphere game. And weâ€| made do."

"Nice to see you're making use of an unnecessary component."

"Unnecessary?" Fuka looked amused, "I don't think that was the message we intended to get across. Regardless you make a good point."

'Hyoronmee found his gaze drawn across the table to the other occupants.

Two Kig-Yar were bickering on the far side in their own tongue, one was a broad-shouldered shipmaster clad in beautifully intricate armor. The other was smaller with twig-thick arms and a massive overbite even for a Jackal. A pair of what could only be spectacles were balanced on the bridge of his beak, however a single glance at the sharp gleam in his eyes gave a firm idea of who was actually in charge.

The other was an Unggoy Ultra, quietly flicking through holograms on a small purple heptagon.

"Distressingly so." 'Hyoronmee sighed, picking up a broad-rimmed glass of water and scrutinized it carefully. He could only marvel at a species with so many little creatures living in an apparently filtered glass.

Lord Hood's lips twitched in what could have almost passed for a smile. "Unggoy Councilor?"

'Hyoronmee snorted, lemon-tinted water spilling over his fingers. "Not bloody likely. He's just a Captain."

The Grunt looked up sharply with a snort.

"Ah," Fuka hastily corrected himself, "Commander, apparently." He thoughtfully stirred his drink with the tip of one thin finger. "I shouldn't pay any attention to the business regarding the rumored, aha, Unggoy Councilor's if I were you."

"I thought you'd once mentionedâ€¦"

"Indeed," 'Hyoronmee smiled, his mandibles twitching erratically with mirth, "quite the brainwave of mine, I think. You see Hood, Unggoy culture is complicated. Unnecessarily so one feels," he shot a meaningful glare at the Grunt. "There are so many different tiers of Unggoy each with their own quirks and traditions and their own variant on the Balaho language. The Parsnecs, the Hergonites, the West Cruuns, the Garglers of the Puissant Squealâ€¦ there's so many of the little buggers it's more than my jobs worth to remember them all! It's their inability to get along that, admittedly kept down the number of Grunt Rebellions it however causes enough other social quandaries to deal with. Equally fortunate, their idea of warfare consists of hanging off a pillar of sulfur and screaming at one another. Still, I wouldn't want to risk promoting them to an actual rank of Councilor so I came up with a rather elegant solution. As long as I allow them to strut around like they own the place wearing big hats, no one cares that they have no real power. The other Unggoy are aware to this fact so there are noâ€¦ incidents."

"Incidents?"

"Hog tying."

"Ah."

"We get upheavals." The Grunt sighed and shut off the heptagon. "Many

Unggoy have been _thinking_."

"That's good to hear." Noted Hood.

>The Grunt gave him a look like he'd just stuck a crayon up his nose. "When Unggoy think, Unggoy question." He hissed. "All stupid Unggoy making mistakes on mass. Me don't approve of that."

"So you tell them a-all what to do." The skinny Kig-Yar rasped.

"Exa-actly what you'd expect from a Grunt!"

"And me bet clever politics is your _specialty_." The Unggoy sneered. "Or you too steeped in own filth to work out what stupid point you make? Who clean out your cage today Jackal?"

"We will have you on a spit Unggo-oy!"

"Me dare you chicken-bait."

"Wha-at's a chicken?"

"Don't know!"

"Gun fodder."

"Stupid Jackal."

"Gas su-u-ucker!"

"Enough!" 'Hyoronmee roared. "Quiet down now or I'll expunge your entrails with a hook and have the both of you served to the Brutes! Diced. Grilled. And with a wedge of lemon." He glowered at the two as the Kig-Yar and Unggoy sunk back into their seats.

The Jackal pulled off his fogged spectacles and gave them a cursory wipe. "Wha-at?"

Lord Hood coughed. "Back on the matter at hand?"

"Gladly."

The main door hissed open and a group of figures trailed in.

The current residents of the room rose to their feet respectfully as Taso 'Ratanalee strode ahead of the column, a genial grin plastered across his alien features.

"Hail Eminence. Lord," he bowed, "Commander." His eye was drawn to the Jackals, "Shipmaster."

The larger Kig-Yar waved a claw airily, and 'Ratanalee glowered. "Insolence." He muttered.

"What you expect Excellency?" The Unggoy flounced upright with a high-pitched giggle, "they all bird-brained."

"Ha! I like where this is goin already," Avery Johnson skirted around the Zealot with a wry grin, "who's the little upstart then?" He caught sight of the Unggoy and his grin broadened. "And who might you be?"

"Commander Spegg Excellâ€| human." The Grunt beamed behind its methane filter.

"Nice to meet you." Johnson sunk into a seat next to him. "You little bastard."

"Lord Hood," 'Ratanalee nodded towards Hood's impassive countenance, "always a pleasure."

"And you Commander." Hood inclined his head. He glanced behind the Zealot and raised an eyebrow quizzically. "Keyes?"

Miranda Keyes and another Elite were lurking by the door, watching the proceedings moodily. Miranda winked, "waiting for the testosterone to work its way out of the room sir."

"Of course."

Miranda saluted and found herself a seat.

The last Sangheili came forward. 'Ratanalee mouthed something to Fuka then coughed politely as the Councilor chuckled. "This, brothers, is my sister, Tusa 'Falana. No doubt most of you have had cordial greetings with her at one point or another."

"Pretend we haven't." Offered Hood, "and explain."

Every eye in the room somehow settled on Tusa. Miranda vaguely recalled the girl from the banquet of a while back (though most Sangheili had scoffed at the term) as a girl of proud bearing with fleshy tendrils around her head and neck. It was a slightly different young lady this time, strangely pretty even to the human eye. A scarlet figure clad in swathes of silk, lace and velvet, a golden plume rising out through the mass around her temple.

She extended a languorous claw, then surprised Hood as he rose to meet it by clasping his own hand between her slender fingers and lightly pressing the tips of her mandibles to his knuckles. "An honor, lord."

"My sister," 'Ratanalee covered his own mandibles to prevent Hood noticing his smirk, "is quite talented in many arts. Heiress, dancer, poet, general media fodder," he shrugged, "it is however, for her linguistic skills that I asked her to come today. She will ensure that there are noâ€| inter-language slurs. The last thing we need are a pack full of _Jiralhuun_."

"Sons of Brutes," added Tusa helpfully. She looked around, casually fishing a sheaf of curled papers and a quill out of her expansive pockets. "I shall also be noting down the proceedings. Will the Master Chief be joining us?"

"No," Miranda sniffed, "it didn't really seem fair to punish him. He did so _well_ with the training exercises."

"I'm choosing to ignore the irony of that statement," Hood snapped.

"Oh dear," sighed Tusa, making a note on the papers, "do you want me to write that down?"

"Don't." 'Ratanalee leant forward and snatched the quill from her grip. "You can have it back when the meeting starts proper."

Tusa stuck out her mandibles at him, "you're not impressing anyone you know," she hissed.

"I realize," 'Ratanalee shot back, "however I find it fun."

"It is distressing you still treat me thus," Tusa growled, "I _can_ contend with a situation myself and I certainly don't need you to steal my pen!"

"You can have it back when you behave." 'Ratanalee smirked.

"Ooo, and we are most distressed."

Miranda Keyes grinned at the ceiling and began to absent-mindedly drum her fingers on the table. "And who is missing from our happy little circus then?"

'Hyoronmee's head snapped round, "the Arbiter will not be attending."

"Aww," Miranda sighed, "but we always get on so well."

"So I hear."

"Meaning?"

"Ohâ€¦ nothing."

The two Jackals at the end of the room began to snigger, until the point where the smaller one exploded into a snort.

"What is it?" 'Ratanalee cocked his head on one side. "You smell something?"

"Swe-e-at and fear." The creature cackled, "and human musk."

"Lovely." Chortled Miranda. "And who might that be?" The door hissed open, "ah, I should have known." She rose to her feet, an effect mirrored by the rest of the humans and Sangheili. If Spegg the Unggoy got his feet it wasn't noticeable however, as no discernible alteration in his height was evident.

The Prime Minister of Earth, Daniel Paxton entered the room.

He was of medium height, though his build would have been lucky to impress a scarecrow. His eyes were large and watery, as was a great deal of the rest of him. From his quivering lips, lank, dirty-blond hair and runny nose to a handshake that would more than likely be called moist. Even his suit held that 'just pulled out of the wash look' that made everyone else in the room glance out the door to see if it was raining. And you couldn't help shake the feeling that if he jiggled about too much he'd just slosh away.

He was also being escorted by a pair of no-nonsense men in starched black suits and a muscle structure that even a Spartan could be proud

of.

They were decidedly uneasy in the knowledge that even Tusa towered over them.

Lord Hood glared at the two, "I assure you Prime Minister, your associates will not be necessary here."

Paxton gestured damply over his shoulder, "my secretary saidâ€|"

"Prime Minister, this is one Spartan away from being the single most secure room in the Cairo station, the planet nay even this whole gosh darn sub-sector of space." Sighed Miranda, "so I'd like to take the time to inform you that your little suit warmers can go and toddle their way into a dark room somewhere and watch something important, I'm considering maybe their own toes as they curl away to whatever swish new theme tunes that somehow pop into their pocket 'Prime Minister monitors,' their raspberries, blueberries, grapefruits, whatever vegetable namesake they happen to have adopted for the duration of their short-lived imports that oh-so-readily drops into their little pockets filling out the gaps left by their pea-sized brains."

As she subsided, Hood gave her a meaningful look. "Are you alright Keyes? I can't help but notice you've been juggling a great deal of extra work most nightsâ€|"

"I'm taking medicine."

"I see." Hood returned his stare to Paxton. "So?"

The Prime Minister waved over his shoulder again. "You heard the man."

His bodyguards shrugged at one another, then stalked out.

"Gentlemen," Paxton folded into a seat. "What awaits us?"

"Fuka 'Hyoronmee," Lord Hood leant across the table, "I'd like to introduce Daniel Paxton. _Our_ Unggoy Councilor."

"Charming."

"Am I really?" Said Paxton, leaning eagerly towards the two.
"Gosh."

Tusa irritably tapped her papers, shooting a dagger-laden glare in 'Ratanalee's direction. "I could really use a drink right now," she wheedled, "care to pass the water?"

"Taste's like you'd expect from a human." 'Hyoronmee nudged it towards her.

"I'd prefer tea myself," noted Paxton. "Something a bit more _real_ maybe."

Miranda coughed, "how very British of you."

"You're a cruel woman Keyes." Paxton sighed. "Still I'm sure your opinion is noted."

>"Or it would be."Tusa hissed around her glass. "But for someoneâ€|"

"Oh write it in charcoal for all the good it will do you." Snarled 'Hyoronmee, "but kindly sort out your sibling rivalries in peace."

Tusa bowed. "A wise council."

Zealot 'Ratanalee gave a start as Tusa exploded out of her seat, bearing him to the ground out of sheer impetus.

The Commander's disinclination to harm his sister meant the two became little more than a squabbling ball of limbs. 'Hyoronmee pointedly ignored them, sparing Paxton a faint smile. "So councilorâ€| humanâ€| ministerâ€| thing, were you in need of some refreshments?"

The Prime Minister smiled weakly. "Is this normal?"

"Oh of course," Lord Hood shot 'Hyoronmee a pained look, "people have an alarming tendency to drink when they are thirsty, it has become something of a survival trait. Water?"

"Please," Miranda proffered her glass, seemingly unaware of the table shaking as Tusa's hoof gave it a particularly vicious kick. "It's a wonderful time of year for it, I hear the water's imported fresh from Ireland."

"Which island pray?" Johnson's face was set in an expression of almost angelic innocence as 'Ratanalee began swearing loudly in Sangheili. "Not goin to translate that, hey Tusa?"

"Fut uf!"

"When you've taken your foot out of your mouth of course."

"Yuff."

"Sorry, Taso's foot."

"Wonderful," Miranda cradled her glass in her hands with broad grin, "now, if I could draw your attention to the matter at hand," she motioned at a pile of covered files next to the water decanter.

"Someone has taken a great liberty to list our immediate goals for this meetingâ€|"

>"Here," Avery Johnson punched his fist in the air, "spent all night putting it together, ma'am."<p>

"Huhâ€| Really?"

"Yep."

"You meanâ€| you?"

"That's the one."

"As inâ€| youâ€|? Dealt with the paperwork?"

"That so surprising?"

"Well no Iâ€|" Miranda looked disgruntled, "call it a change of pace."

"Will do ma'am."

"Umâ€|" Spegg tentatively raised his paw, a look befitting his position (pure terror) flitting behind his methane filter.
"Excellencies? Door opening."

Miranda's head snapped round. "Oh myâ€|"

The Cairo's main doors were fitted large enough for a Spartan in full MJOLNIR, even one as large as the Master Chief to walk under comfortably. Even so, the massive Jiralhanae wise-woman, Sphinx, had to duck her head to fit under the frame.

She beamed, that is to say, bared her fangs in an assumed friendly gesture. "Greetings, food." She paused then turned and glanced over her shoulder, muttering something to whoever was standing behind her. "Oh, apologies," she turned back with a worried frown, "uhâ€| greetingsâ€| equals?" Yes, equals, good day to you." She thrust her massive chest out proudly. "Poor translation, apologies."

Paxton let out a high-pitched giggle. "Not a problem. Haha, we're all friends here right?"

"Ha ha." Said Sphinx solemnly. She carefully stepped over the squabbling Ana siblings and stood to attention by the table.

The Arbiter poked his head around the door. Exceptâ€|

"Oh, Fuka you bastard," Miranda turned and glared at 'Hyoronmee, "you lied to me."

"A simple re-imagining of the truth." The Councilor shrugged, "I merely stretched it."

"I'll bet," Miranda stood up, "then allow me to guess this one." She saluted, "hello Chieftain."

"Miranda. Your Lordship. _Johnson_."

"Hey Herpes."

"Oh dear," The Arbiterâ€| Chieftain beamed. He wasn't wearing his favored cuirass. Instead, he stood resplendent in full Jiralhanae power armor, perfectly tailored to his frame. "Terrific to see you all. Although," he trotted through and gallantly proffered Sphinx a seat, "we ran into a bit of trouble outside. Two individuals tried to waylay us and I was forced to reduce their consciousness level to nil."

"Oh dear, not too much damage I hope."

"With respect," the Arbiter grated, "they did make several threatening motions towards Sphinx and made more than one reference

to my mother in a derogatory manner. I think so anyway, tell me; what exactly is 'yo mamma,' some manner of war cry?"

"No."

"How unfortunate."

"So," Paxton steepled his fingers, "you had to stop them killing her?"

>"Other way around, it was a mercy unconsciousnessing."<p>

"Sounds effectively appropriate." Tusa staggered over, clutching her tattered quill triumphantly. "Greetings Chieftain, for your information, I won." She slumped happily against the table. There was a large tear in her lacy jerkin, but she was otherwise unharmed.

'Ratanalee sat up, brandishing an accusing finger, "she bit me!"

"Only a little."

"Standard diplomacy I see," the Chieftain noted, "seems to be going well."

"That method's always worked for me in the past," Sphinx spared Tusa an admiring glance. "Don't see why we should stop now. Reach out and bite someone, hey?"

"Hay is for horses," giggled Paxton nervously, displaying his own rather horsey overbite. "Now if we could get things started?"

"Sure, got the list of daily activities right here," Johnson beamed and spread out the files, "take whichever you want, I've written them all out in bold, colorful text for tiny minds."

"Is this a jibe at me?" Sphinx snarled.

"I was thinking presidentially actually, sorry for the mix-up sugar."

"Oh my," Sphinx glanced away from the roguish Sergeant's knowing smirk, flushing.

Johnson cocked an eyebrow, but continued undaunted, "kindly turn to page one. You too my _BÃ¢tards d'engagement_."

"Covenant Bastards," sighed Tusa, her quill already scything across the page.

"Oh, you speak French?"

Tusa rolled her eyes, "who doesn't?"

"You," Johnson wagged a finger under her nose, "you are a fun girl."

"Be wary of her," shot 'Ratanalee, "she _will_ maliciously and eloquently write down everything you say."

Johnson rolled his eyes and spread-open his file. He licked his thumb dramatically and scrolled down the list. "Let's see here, opening introductions, check. Scary Brute comes in, check. Pretentious Prime Minister made to feel welcome, check."

"As you were Johnson." Lord Hood scowled.

"Just making light Sir. Sorry for the petty annoyances, Sir."

"Uhâ€¦" Fuka 'Hyoronmee raised a claw, "can I ask but one questionâ€¦?" Nestled just inside the cover of the file was a smaller sheet of paper. Withâ€¦ more colors. "What is this?"

"That, my friends," Johnson beamed, "is a picture by my young, inspired nephew of his personal favorite alien bastard, the Arbiter who is not here."

"Why does it say 'Mister Smelly?'" Sphinx peered at both sides of the sheet.

"He's very descriptive."

"And why did you feel it necessary to include it?" 'Hyoronmee sighed.

"Aside from the obvious?"

"Because you're you?"

"I said aside from that!"

"I've never seen you smile like this before Chieftain," Sphinx brandished the paper at the cringing Elite, "what are these things?"

"Stink lines or teeth."

"I would like to keep this," the Jiralhanae grinned, "art isn't wisely practiced by my kind anymore, the young ones may find it interesting."

Paxton leant over and elbowed Miranda, "am I holding it upside down?" He muttered.

"I'd rather suggest a good place to stick itâ€¦"

"You are a very, very unpleasant woman."

"Works both ways sweetheart."

"If we may continue!" Roared 'Hyoronmee. The Elite was tapping the table irritably behind a wadded ball of paper. Clearly he didn't get the joke. "First order," he scowled, "in bright green, I note."

"You're welcome."

"It would appear to be; an affirmation of diplomatic conditions. Anyone?" He sniffed, "very well. Then the floor is taken by Fuka

'Hyoronmee, Councilor of the ministry of Concert and maintainer of social intercourse, _stop sniggering Johnson_. Uhm, as I was saying, to begin with I would like to congratulate Sphinx and her Chieftain for the integration of Jiralhanae back into Covenant society."

"Glad to assist," Sphinx rumbled.

"However, I would also like to note the preceding events of at least a dozen riots ranging from a two-man skirmish in the hallway to something quite odd involving a roomful of chickens."

The skinny Jackal elbowed Spegg roughly and muttered, "sti-i-ill don't know wha-at that is."

"On a second, and more poignant however," 'Hyoronmee sighed, "I am glad we've made it that far. Furthermore, thanks to a particularly successful mission of peace under the command of Zealot 'Ratanalee we now have adopted a Yanme'e hive cluster into our fold, so all the more honor to his benison. Even if he is bleeding."

"She bit me."

"Well, I am very glad we've drawn in a few more aliens," Paxton smiled stiffly, "nothing like another group of ex-Covenant radicals hanging around to help soothe the civilian populace."

"That's a very morbid summary."

"Is it? I thought I was being quite optimistic. At least there aren't any Prophets around right?" The room took on that echoing silence of a group of people not admitting to anything. "I am right, right?"

"No inâ€| so many words." Spegg muttered.

The Jackal Shipmaster clucked at length to his attendant. "My ma-aster would like to dra-aw you're attention to the Prophet of Wo-onde-er." The twig-thick Jackal hissed.

"But it's not like he has any political power, right?" Pressed the Prime Minister.

"Umâ€|"

"The Prophet has ta-aken on the role o-of Religious overseer." Continued the Kig-Yar gleefully, "he dictates the ru-u-uling of the Forerunners to the wider community-y. He bestows the blessings of ou-ur lords upon the worthy and wa-a-atches over the devices of greater divinity."

"Soâ€| completely different to how he worked before then?"

"I find your tone insulting. And your strikingly accurate generalizations are beginning to bring back my nervous tic." 'Hyoronmee heaved.

No one in the room appeared to want to meet one another's eye. The Jackals held a brief clucking argument that culminated in both glancing at Fuka 'Hyoronmee and sniggering. Daniel Paxton interlaced his spidery fingers and leant back in his seat, squealing backwards

across the floor and anchoring himself to the desk with his heels. He glanced at Tusa 'Falana. "Take a quick break?"

"Already noted down," Tusa smiled pleasantly. "With my pen."

"You bit me."

"I like that suggestion anyway," Tusa gave the others a watery look. "I need a few moments to gather my thoughts."

"All three of them?"

"Is this because I bit you?"

"I'll tell you when I find my fingertip."

Almost every chair in the room was flung back as the occupants hurriedly vacated leaving Paxton and Johnson alone at the table.

The Sergeant Major picked up his list and traced his finger down the sheet. "'Embarrassed by Prime Minister' in bright red. Checkaroo."

[illegible]

Herbal water swirled around Sphinx' paw as she wrung out a steaming cloth. With a weak sigh she carefully applied the intense-scented remedy to the cracked skin on the Arbiter's chest.

The holy warrior of the Covenant, lying prostrate on a bench, winced.
"No claws woman!"

Sphinx let out affectionate rumble and continued her administrations, "I did tell you to wear a bodysuit."

"And what, may I ask," shot the Arbiter, "is your kind's armor made of, shards of glass? Is there a painkiller injected beforehand or do you just apply the whole suit surgically?"

"Poor boy," Sphinx clucked. "And is he scratched by the shiny metal? Poor thing."

Watching the two in avid amusement, Miranda Keyes let out a quiet chuckle, "you do realize Paxton is going to wonder where when we've been gone for the past twenty minutes, right?"

"Let him wonder," yelled the Arbiter, "parts of me that I wasn't even aware of have become the center of a world of pain!"

Sphinx' lips curled in the universal grimace of motherly affection. "Do you wish for a tender shoulder massage, that always worked on my former mate."

"I have no doubt but I also guess that his back was not recently mangled by the hell-hounds of Jiralhanae worksmanship at the time. Cloth, woman!"

Sphinx shot Miranda a withering look, "_woman._" She snorted.

"Oh let him be," Miranda smirked, "he's hurting." She elbowed Fuka 'Hyoronmee roughly, "is there anything you care to add?"

With his head resting against a water cooler, the Elite Councilor leered, "yes. Do that again and I'll snap you."

"Regardless," Miranda matched his look, "I think we need a strategy, Paxton has turned out slightly smarter than anticipated. I suggest immediate evasion of any and all questions posed."

"That only works if we can somehow bind his lips."

"He's sharp enough for a human," Sphinx admitted, "though I am fighting down a desire to put on an overcoat. He has busy eyes."

"So what is our plan?"

"Put him down as brutally as possible?" 'Hyoronmee wasn't particularly happy with the situation so far, attempted sibling genocide and Johnson's quirks notwithstanding, he'd always prided himself on a level head and a composed, if slightly starched demeanor. Also he was beginning to suspect that this Paxton individual was a great deal more intelligent than he was and the concept was unnerving him. "Cut him up and serve the buffoon with a wedge of lemon."

"What is it with you and lemons today?"

"Someone scrubbed down my rooms with citrus antiseptic and it burns whenever I sit down."

>"Maybe you should consider pants."<p>

"I've never figured the fly. I'm sorry. The name is very misleading."

The Arbiter let out a rattling hiss, "some advice to dwell on maybe. Consider my nerves, twisted as they are, frayed evermore by the worrisome sound of your voice Fuka. My quest as ever is to ensure peace within the Covenant by whatever means suit, as it is my status has drawn me into a ranked position as a Jiralhanae and if I could be without your vocal excrement for the moment then I shall refrain from acting as such!"

"Is that a threat?"

"However you want it, Fuka."

The Councilor wrinkled his mandibles, "very well. Then we shall return to the festivities and leave you and your delightful creature alone. Enjoy your ministrations."

The Arbiter watched the others depart and shook his head.

Sphinx grated her tusks together and wrung out the cloth, "shall I continue?"

"Indeed. Or at least up until the point where razor blades are no longer a staple part of the Jiralhanae wardrobe."

Sphinx glanced down at her hands, the back at the Arbiter.

She sighed, and upturned her entire herbal remedy over his head.

[illegible]

A lesser-known fact about the Unggoy was their unusual sleeping habits.

Their high metabolism, coupled with unerring paranoia and the knowledge that something, somewhere is out to kill them had left a gap in their already shredded temperament. The average Grunt tended to sleep only in short shifts of anywhere between several minutes to an hour. Most of the higher-ranking Covenant had interpreted this as acute laziness, however, the average Unggoy was able to function quite comfortably off less than four Earth-standard hours of sleep per day.

Certainly this was useful when using a napping Grunt as, for example, a traffic cone.

Although, the constant tendency of Elites, Brutes and to a lesser extent Jackals to keep the Unggoy active in an often 'impolite' fashion had left the smaller aliens in a nearly constant state of irritable fatigue.

So when the Kig-Yar shipmaster gave one of the 'cones' an absent-minded kick, he was making possibly the biggest diplomatic mistake of his life.

The last thing any Grunt wants to wake up next to; is a Jackal.

[illegible]

Daniel Paxton neatly swiveled a Jijeg tile and beamed. "I believe that's six to my Dignity. I will attempt to counter your restraint with a tier-three guardian."

Unggoy Commander, Spegg let out snort, bubbles frothing out the end of his methane filter. The three purple tiles on the table, one octagon, two heptagons, were clearly not working to his favor. "Stupid. You play like Elite."

"Wellâ€¦" The scrawny minister shrugged, "I always like to divert some of my time to the study of the ex-Covenant arts. I like some of the Lekgolo sonnets about the arrival, meeting, war with and eventual domination by; the Sangheili. And I have often taken a study of games as an adequate portrayal of a society. Also you chose to play Sangheili-standard Jijeg, now had you picked Unggoy-standard, then I would have been stumped."

Spegg groaned.

Jijeg_had_ in fact begun life as an Unggoy game, something to superimpose over the usual 'hunting-rock' tournaments, it started as something scribbled on flat stones, eventually becoming more complex and shifting it's focus onto shaped metal. Unfortunately for the

empty places, the meeting was at last able to begin again.

"Is there the possibility that they will turn up?" Fuka 'Hyoronmee glared at Spegg.

The cringing Unggoy gave a weak nod. "Me know all about Jackal's, they always turn up again. No worry. Sometimes smelling like fish, sometimes no see them for days."

"Good, then to business." The Councilor beamed, seemingly unperturbed by the possible unpleasant fate of the Kig-Yar. "From what I hear humanity has at last begun to colonize other worlds."

"Re-begun," Johnson snorted, "it being not good enough for you to kill us. You gotta leave the planet a glassed-out husk, rendering it permanently uninhabitable."

"We like to be thorough." Said 'Hyoronmee.

"Let's not, though," Tusa strained. "Please."

"Moving on." Paxton muttered.

"Yes, let's." Chimed in Zealot Ratanalee, "what is our next subject?"

Paxton met him with a blank stare. "Moving on." He enunciated carefully. "We have been spreading out a great deal further afield. And because of this I must askâ€¦ what about Halo?"

"What do you mean?" Miranda scowled, "that ended, understand? It's finished."

"Uhrhmâ€¦" 'Hyoronmee and 'Ratanalee both spared her a nervous glance. "In a way."

"Any Flood still surviving on Delta Halo will be starving by now," Miranda pressed, "and we've already drawn up plans to demolish it."

"In recourse to that," Tusa shot angrily, "it is a major cultural artifact."

"I was of course referring to the _other_ Halo's." Paxton sighed, "I believe that the tally predicted by the AI 343 Guilty Spark was seven. Right?"

"Theyâ€¦ have yet to be found." 'Hyoronmee shrugged.

"And assuming each on doesn't contain its own Gravemind and a horde of relentless parasites while the remaining overzealous Prophets still search for them, yes? What have we chosen to do?"

"We have chosenâ€¦ to do nothing." The doorway was, for the second time that day, filled by the impressive bulk of Sphinx. She bared her fangs, "my Chieftain has elected to lick his wounds outside. He may join us when he grows up. As I stated," she humped into a seat and rumbled, "we shall refrain from overblown contact with my people. The only way to ensure universal sanctity is to ignore the Jiralhanae to very best of our ability."

"It's always worked in the past right?"

Sphinx leered, "do you pretend to know my people Paxton-man? We are Jiralhanae, to fight is our purpose. When we are without anyone to fight, we fight each other. The loyalists shall dissolve from the inside, how will they even find the rings? The Sangheili are the brains, after all." She glanced at 'Hyoronmee. The Elite gave a resigned shrug, and nodded.

"Her immenseness is correct, nothing short of absolute and complete ignorance will keep the Brutes at bay. The last thing we need is for them to remember why they hate us so much."

"Interesting, I'm beginning to remember why now."

"Your face is misery."

"Wonderful retort, your mate pack it before you left?"

"Indeed." 'Hyoronmee shrugged in Paxton's direction, "now of course, you see why there is no need to fear. Sphinx is the epitome of evolution for her species. It says something for the race as a whole does it not?"

"Moving on," Johnson growled, "when you two finally agree on marital counseling I'm sure we'd all be much obliged. In the meantime we'd best see our final business taken care of before this ends up like every other conference I've headed."

"Headed?"

The Sergeant coughed, "going into the indigo section of my notes?"

"Secured trade services?" The Arbiter-re-Chieftained leant over his shoulder, rags now noticeably sticking out from beneath his armor.

"Son, where in Sam hell did you come from?"
>"The air vents, I find the door too cliché by this point and there are, in fact, two rather angry young men waiting for me outside. Now," the Chieftain nodded to Paxton, "in recourse to our trade, the Sangheili will be only too happy to continue to supply your kind until such point as you finally find your feet or the guilt at last recedes. I'm sure even you would accede to that
'Hyoronmee?"
"Granted."

"Then Indigo is agreed, moving on to Violet. Social Discrepancies?" He glanced quizzically at the others.

"Trouble in paradise." Supplemented Miranda.

"Someone did once throw an egg at me," 'Hyoronmee admitted.

"So what did you do?"

"What do you think? I ate it. They're rare enough as it is, with all the Galagan nests being declared sacred by every Deacon and his brother."

workmanship, neatly interlocking sheets crisscrossed the chamber like the web of some vast arachnid. Trussed up in its center, were two Jackals.

'Ratanalee nodded to his sister, "perhaps it is my imagining but it would seem a wise council to up the Unggoy's rations. Something is telling me that I have been lax of late."

"Indeed."

One of the Kig-Yar painfully twisted his head to ogle the Zealot, "awk?"

"Perhaps they were agitated by protein deficiencies," 'Ratanalee drawled, "I shall have a word with the ships cook, she is getting on in years and her mind is beginning to fade."

"Old 'Sikrovouss? Really?"

"Yes, I believe it is time for afresh, some young blood should see to it that a few changes are employed, and all to the better for it."

"Here here."

"Awk?"

"Quite," 'Ratanalee shook his head as his glass eye jumped in its socket, "may I see your notes of today, by the way? Fading now are the memories of the past, and I don't want to miss them."

"Of course," Tusa smiled and handed him a roll of neatly bound papers.

'Ratanalee gave them a grave look. Then he drew back his hand and hurled them up into the mass of the web, where they landed in amongst the topmost sheets. "Rules to live by Tusa; I always win."

"So like that is it?" Tusa sighed, "I thought so."

'Ratanalee chuckled, and then led the way off the bridge, Tusa trotting to keep up with his long gait. "So that, I should think, does it for the night."

"Awk!"

"Yes indeed." He ushered his sister from the room and at last spared the Jackals a glance, "goodnight."

"Awkâ€| "

16. Competition

Dedication: _I'd like to dedicate the following Chapter to _Spog the Brick in The Wall_ for giving me the encouragement I needed to finish it and for his recently updated 'Domestic Affairs' Spin-off._

_Disclaimer: I do not own anything relating to the Halo

universe._

Exclaimer: I got the idea for this one off an Easter Egg in Halo: Combat Evolved.

And yes, there is a Doctor Who reference in here, see if you can spot it.

* * *

><p>Competition

It wasn't often that the Master Chief, Spartan insignia 117(known to a scarce few as John and many as Demon) was ever faced with the prospect of his own emotions.

Essentially, he shoved what scant number remained deep into his subconscious and only gave them a buzz when he thought it relevant. So it came as a bit of a shock when one fluttered up from the abyss, blew once in his ear and sunk, once again out of sight.

Though admittedly the Spartan barely registered this, all he was aware of was a brief snag in his otherwise innocent sweep of the room.

Looking out of place, as always in the cafeteria and not at all certain what he was doing there in full MJOLNIR apparel, he did a second cursory sweep noting again the faint blip on his otherwise spotless mental radar.

And there it was, a woman at the far end of the room.

Scratch that, said his military mind, _a soldier of the Core that just happened to be of female gender._ Satisfied he was up to speed, the Chief set his helmet on a casual tint, angling it so to the naked eye he seemed not to be focused on anything in particular, then flexed his neck muscles in a gesture that loosened the liquid crystal around his throat to let him tilt his head without altering his apparent focus.

He activated the scope function and highlighted his target.

The woman was facing him, though not actually watching the prying Spartan. Instead her, chilly verdant gaze was focused on multiple pieces of a UNSC standard-issue M6C Magnum assembled in front of her. The Chief watched as she carefully polished the pieces and slid them back together with practiced ease. Yet the Chief could see the faintest movement in her eyes, a near unnoticeable maneuver that nonetheless gave her a very good scope of the room.

He had to admit, maybe it was _that_ which caught his attention, her bearing was almost a perfect match for a Spartan. She had strong, angular features with crimson hair, close-cropped to the sides but with enough of a thatch on top to stand out of place with military standards.

The expression on her face was one of muted hatred, she seemed like a coiled spring, ready to jam something pointy into the eye of anyone who dared look at her in the wrong light.

She wasn't wearing standard military gear, but a joke of tank top and baggy, camo pants.

So, not a Spartan then. Interesting.

He ran a profile match through an external interface with the Cairo's systems but he may as well as not bothered as the system seemed to believe she didn't even exist.

"Yeah, dude, I wouldn't." The Chief snapped back almost with a start. He quickly readjusted his visor and turned around to glare at whomever had interrupted his scrutiny.

Staring down at him (barely) was a UNSC Private, jet-black hair, rough, stubbled features and a set of faded cobalt armor that had really seen better days. "Hey dude, this seat taken?" Not waiting for a reply, the Private slunk into a nearby seat and straddled it just across from the Chief. "Name's Church buddy, we met before, you don't remember me, and that," he nodded over his shoulder at the red-head, "is my girlfriend. Sorta. So don't get any funny ideas or I will be forced to go and get myself severely beaten."
>"I don't have ideas." The Chief grated. "What exactly are you referring to?"

"Oh _please_, " Church rolled his eyes, "as if you're ogling anyone else in this sausage factory."

The Chief simply grunted, not seeing any reason to deny it. "Who is she?"

"You don't know?" Church laughed, "well sure, guess you're up on your high horse riding bombs into the heart of the Covenant armada, maybe you can't pick up on the little things." He nodded over his shoulder, "I can't tell you her real name, not that it's a secret or anything, she just doesn't like it much. Anyone who knows her just calls her Tex."

"And if you don't know her?"

"Then you're probably dead. Tex is kind of a bitch about that sort of thing."

The Master Chief nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you. Now, the next time you address me consider a formal behest or I will be forced to break all your fingers."

"Nuh uh," Church waved one of said digits, "little late Spartan man, Tex beat you to it." He flexed his hands to an accompaniment of cricks. "Birthday present, her birthday you understand. Did the whole lot with a hastily bought sandwich press. And when the bones in my thumbs extrude shards of pain, I can sense the way the winds are blowing. So excuse me if I'm not scared by your big 'Mister Marine' act."

The Master Chief nodded. In a sense it was actually refreshing.

"Very well, Private. Then what _is_ she exactly?"

Church leant forward conspiratorially, then gave a start of annoyance

as the Master Chief set up a private COM link with the transceiver in his collar. The latest model could read the faintest mouth movement and the expelling of air allowing for the avoidance of non-lip-reading eavesdroppers.

"_Have you ever heard of Project: Xerxes?"_ Church's distorted voice hissed in the Chief's speakers.

"Let's just pretend I have yet to hear it shall we?"

"_Thought as much, heh, guess 'intelligence' isn't really your specificationâ€|"_

"Just get on with it!"

"_Guessed that too. I assume you've heard of the Battle of Thermopylae? A dinky group of Spartans holding back shitloads of Persian infantry, right? Now guess the name of the Persian top-dog."_

The Master Chief sighed, faint spots of fog tinting the interior of his visor before the air filters kicked in and swept it aside. "Your point?"

"_You think ONI was happy with just one group of Spartans?"_

"Iâ€| see."

"_Yeah, exceptâ€|" _Church hesitated, _"except they didn't like the risk of your augmentations."_

"Augmentations."

"_Yeah, those. So they did the only other thing they could think of to make the Xerxes Project work. Advanced military training, extreme armor upgrades and an AI apiece."_ Church said _AI_ with the same inflection a medical practitioner would say _virus._ _"Only things didn't go entirely to plan, right, so the Project never went public. The little Shitcups on board started messing about in their heads, playing with things they shouldn't haveâ€|"_

"And how do you know so much about it, assuming it was all so secret?"

"_How do you think?" _Church snorted derisively, _"I was one of them. Tex weaseled me a position on the Xerxes Project. But Iâ€| uh, left forâ€| diplomatic reasons."_

The Master Chief was silent. He tilted his head on one side and held his finger up to his temple, lifting it to mimic a raised eyebrow.

Church sniggered and finished, _"certain incidents with a sniper rifle and several select pieces of the CO's anatomy. ONI figured I'd be of more helpâ€| elsewhere."_

"Never suspected ONI could think." The Chief turned and stared across the room. Tex was on her feet, sidearm clipped ominously to her belt. "Privateâ€| can Tex read lips?"

"Oh hell!" Church vanished under the table in a move that would've impressed even Guilty Spark's teleport matrix. "Shitshitshit! Is she coming this way? You didn't see me!"

"She isn't and I wish I hadn't." The Master Chief rose, his reinforced chair creaking back into shape as half a ton of super-human was extracted from it. "What is she?"

Tex crossed the cantina in slow, easy steps, making a direct beeline for the technical quadrant of the room. The Master Chief now realized what he'd missed.

Crouching by an open panel in the wall was the hunched spine of the strangely giggly girl from Maintenance, and the bulk of an Elite technician. The maintenance girl leant in and disappeared up to the waist in the wall.

"You can join me if you want." With that cryptic remark the Chief set off after Tex and the technicians. Lunch just got interesting.

Tex was already going at a steady jog by the time she reached the vent. She brushed aside the scrawny Elite and grasped the maintenance girl by her ankle, ripping her squarely from the wall.

"Yaah! What the hell?" The girl flailed about on the end of Tex' surprisingly powerful grip, she took a swipe at Tex' legs only to be rewarded by a short drop to the ground.

Seemingly unmoved by the turmoil she'd wrought, Tex slammed one of her combat boots into the wall with a fierce clang. She then leant forward and set her ear to the chilly metal, her expression forming into one of intense concentration.

By this time the Master Chief arrived in the midst of the struggle, the maintenance girl was yelling expletives at Tex while the SpecOps herself was still focused on the wall with an expression that seemed to convey all of this was happening somewhere else.

As the Elite got to his feet, Tex planted her palm on the maintenance girl's face, effectively cutting her off mid-curse, and sent her flying back with a fierce thrust of her hand. The Master Chief absentmindedly put out his hand and caught her before the girl hit the ground.

Tex turned slowly and glowered at the Sangheili tech, "it isn't here, you're wasting your time. If you want to make yourself useful I'd suggest you try widening your search area. I can only guess that the smell here isn't enough, too much processed food. Try closer to the fusion reactors, but don't hold your breath."

The Sangheili gaped at her for a moment, then bowed its head, picked up its equipment and scurried out of the cafeteria. With an angry grunt, the maintenance girl disentangled herself from the Master Chief's palm and stalked away after him, shooting Tex a glare that, if looks could kill, would definitely think about it.

"Well," she rounded on Church and the Chief, "I suppose I'm probably not surprised. I guess I'm the only one man enough for the job." With a curt nod she spun on her heel, spraying sparks across the floor and strode away.

Church nudged the Chief with his elbow. "Uhrmâ€¦ what did I just miss?"

"Don't do that." The Spartan turned the full glare of his visor on the Private, "if she's ONI then I can only guess it's classified. I don't see how it's any of our business."

Both Spartan and soldier turned and stared out where Tex had exited.

"True," Church admitted, "it isn't." He smiled wryly, "that ever stopped you before?"

"No."

[illegible]

Miranda Keyes office didn't usually serve as a hub of activity in the Cairo, but this was a special circumstance. At least three engineers, two human techs and another Elite were congregated in with Commander Keyes, gathered around her open air vent.

Two of the engineers were extruding their tendrils into the void, but rather than the usual repairs they seemed to be digging something out.

Miranda sat on the edge of her desk beside a sea of empty polystyrene cups. "Tell me again, please. What did you find?"

One of the human tech's held what seemed to be a collection of dismembered wires, the end visibly frayed and&mdashgnawed. "I've said it once ma'am and I'll say it again, it's gremlins!"

"I appreciate the sentiment but I find that very hard to believe," Miranda sighed. "Possibly a rogue Grunt or a Jackal, maybe a small animal loose in the system. Could even be an Engineer," Miranda shot a glance at the Huragok, "a damaged Engineer." She amended. "Right?"

The lone Sangheili was leant against the wall, the fluorescent lighting gleaming off his ceremonial armor. The Arbiter cracked a watery smile. "Unlikely. I've seen them break, I've seen them become disorientated and clog the system like so much phlegm. But this degree of damage isâ€¦ heresy to them."

As if to illustrate his point the third of the Huragok let out a high-pitched keening and tried to muscle past its fellows in a bid to repair what it saw as a gaping wound in the universe. The other two, under stringent orders not to repair, rebuffed it.

As the Huragok let out a wail the Arbiter grasped a hold of its tentacle and led it gently to Miranda's desk where it began spasmodically sorting items. "I confer. However I don't doubt it is a small mammal. A Jackal would have eaten someone by now. And an Unggoy would be pleasantly decaying in an air vent."

"It would improve their usual smell." The second human tech

grinned.

"I wouldn't say that if I thought one was in the room. Unless you wanted one of your arms permanently pretzeled." With not a sound, Tex sidled into the office with an expression barely suppressed rage. "I couldn't find it ma'am, I would like to request permission for an active search."

"Denied," Miranda growled, "it's bad enough ONI sent you but I won't have someone with your jurisdiction tearing this station apart."

"Really?" Tex grinned wolfishly, "I had hoped to spare you the embarrassment of pulling rank, but if you wanted to fight me for it I would be more than happy to oblige. Now, let me loose, or I'll report you."

"Report nothing you stuck up bitch," The Master Chief and Church shouldered in past her, "ma'am," he saluted Miranda, "permission to ask what the hell's going on?"

"I don't see why not." Miranda's expression brightened into what almost qualified for manic cheer. "In fact I think that's the best suggestion I've heard all day. Oh," almost as an afterthought she pointed at the Arbiter, "Master Chief, have you met the Arbiter?"

"What happened to Chieftain?" The Spartan took a mild form of pleasure from the red coloration beginning to tint Tex' face at the prospect of being ignored.

"Sphinx is an epic negotiator." The Arbiter shrugged. "My services are no longer required. I'd do a little dance of celebration but I'm afraid it would destroy my air of mystique and grandeur."

"Good to have you back."

"The same en masse I'm sure."

"Huurhhh." Church looked the Arbiter up and down, "you're a lot bigger in person."

"In Sangheilian," the Arbiter's mandibles twitched, "thank you."

"For a squidhead."

"I'll take that in my stride as well." The Arbiter leered, "though what a little speck of a creature has to say on the subject is irrelevant." The Arbiter nodded at Miranda, "we have a larger situation to tackle."

"And is this 'larger situation' the reason I was posted in the cafeteria?" The Master Chief folded his arms over his chest.

"Yes Chief, and congrats for abandoning said post by the way." Tex growled. "Miss Keyes, under ONI jurisdiction: Xeno-101 I forbid you to say any more. Else I'll have to get a little shooty and no one here wants that."

"Shootiness aside however," said the Arbiter gravely, "under jurisdiction: M-E it would be very sensible to explain what is going on to any new arrivals that may be of some use here."

"And what the hell's jurisdiction: M-E?"

The Arbiter scowled and jabbed a claw at his chest. "Me."

"I concede," said Miranda with a grateful sigh. "Sorry Tex, but I don't want to cause an intergalactic incident." She turned to the Chief, "I'd probably better explain, please, make yourself comfortable."

The Spartan shifted his stance a fraction of a millimeter. "Right, it's like this," Miranda gently took to frayed cable from one of the technicians, "simply put: there's an anomaly loose somewhere on this station, a small animal presumably. So far the damage it's caused has been minimal, but numerous."

"Simple solution ma'am," said the Spartan carefully, "isolate it and vent the atmosphere in the quadrant."

"Nah ah," Miranda shook her head, "won't work for two reasons, number one: we already tried that and it didn't work. Number two: the anomaly is extremely hard to pinpoint. It seems to generate no body heat, no identifiable trails and no obvious movement patterns. We're working in the dark without a lead here. Quite a few I've questioned have claimed they saw it, and at least three claimed to have killed it. Though when a formal body search was conducted we found one big zero. Either the little monster's bullet-proof, or we've got some marines around with too much to prove."

"It's gremlins I tell ya." Sniffed the tech, "every time a calibrated Hornet refused to take off, every time a new 'hog shoots a wheel, every time a door shuts on its own; gremlins. We got proof, they've been around since old times, mocking little bastards and I reckon," he jerked a thumb at the Arbiter, "his types are to blame. It's like space cooties comin in techno form. First you freaks take Elvis, now this!"

Miranda watched the man carefully as he swayed on the spot. "Uhrmâ€¦ Travis. How much sleep have gotten recently."

"Iâ€¦" The tech's eyes flickered and he slumped against Keyes' desk, scattering her effects and prompting a squeal of rage from the Huragok.

"Yeah," said Miranda, "thought so."

"My _type _are not to blame," the Arbiter bridled, "but I will help if you wish it."

"Don't take offence Assbiter."

"I try notâ€¦"

"He only meant your type as a group of ruthless alien brigands with no social conscience." The Master Chief nodded to Miranda, "if you need the creature caught then consider it done."

Tex scoffed, "I'm sorry? Really? You think it's that easy," she huffed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes, "alright then. Do what you want. However, Keyes," Tex turned and extended her hand towards the Commander, "I will be bringing this thing back, on a platter, Spartan or no Spartan." She shot the Chief a glare, "got that knuckles? Right," she splayed her fingers and stretched her left hand to its full length. "Gasbag, my effects if you please."

Trilling delightedly, the lone Engineer breezed over to the ONI operative with an odd-shaped gauntlet held in its loving grip. With an air of ceremony, and some enthusiasm, it quickly buckled the edifice up to Tex' elbow, its cilia splitting into microscopic hairs to connect a series of wires to the minute ports in Tex' knuckles and up her arm.

As the thing ran its concluding check-up, Tex abruptly snatched her hand back. "Know what this is Chief?" She flexed her fingers, "probably not, I don't suppose they supply this kind of tech to the grunt workers." Holding her hand now palm-up Tex revealed a small circle of glass set into the metal. Purple lights and spiraling clouds of data swirled on Tex's palm, generating the appearance of something that almost looked human before she closed her fingers over it. "That's enoughâ€| for now. Guess you'll have to find out what I'm capable of as you go. Try to keep up."

With a jaunty salute, Tex whirled on her heel and pelted from the office.

"Well?" The Arbiter growled at the dumbly watching Spartan, "run Demon, run."

The Chief exploded off the ground with a crash of metal, hitting his stride in a mere half-dozen paces. At full speed the Spartan seemed almost running in slow motion, every step ponderous yet somehow it would be easy to see a horse falling behind in his dust.

"_It won't work, you know."_

The Chief's lip twitched as he rounded a corner, vaulted over a downed guard robot and hit the ground again at full tilt. "Why not?" He grated. He didn't bother asking who had hacked into his personal COM link. The voice was one he knew better than his own.

"_You're behind already, she's gone and loaded herself with an adrenaline bomb."_

"We both know that's only a temporary effect."

"_Doesn't have to be permanent. Just needs to beat you."_

"Good," the Spartan snarled, "I like a challenge."

"_Yeah, huh. Don't I know it."_

The Chief smirked, faintly. One corner, one-hundred and fifty meters and closing.

"_You're going the right way at least," _the voice persisted, _"the fusion reactors, how did you know?"_

"Call it a little bird. And someâ€¦ woman's intuition."

"_Huzzah._" The voice sounded tired, almost weary of the Spartan's antics. "_Butâ€¦ what if you miss?"_

"I won't." The Spartan was a blur when he finally hit the corner, turned neatly and tore down the hallwayâ€¦

â€¦ Just as the main blast door sealed over Tex's grin.

"Daâ€¦" The Spartan hit it full tilt.

The blast doors of the Cairo were designed to withhold against atmospheric pressures, plasma torpedoes and even the end blowout radius of a HAVOK warhead.

The Master Chief left a sizable dent.

"_Mmm._" Cortana's avatar flowed out of a nearby console, hands squarely on her hips. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

The Chief disentangled himself from the stricken door and backed up a step. "Open it." He growled.

Symbols ran the length of Cortana's body, as she colored a rainbow of emotions. She paused and cocked her head like an actor listening to stage directions offside. "No-ooo." She admitted at length. "Sorry. She's crushed the controls, there's no internal way to open it without direct maintenance. And let's just say your midmorning run didn't help."

"Hmm."

>"It seems we've hit a snag." Cortana prompted.<p>

"Snagged on what?" Church and the Arbiter came jogging up the passage, "I say," the Elite enthused, "I heard the clang all the way back with Miss Keyes, everything alright? Oh, good day Cortana."

"Arbiter," the AI winked. "Looking scaly as ever."

"I know, isn't it glorious?"

"Noted." Cortana raised an artificial eyebrow at the Chief. "Well? What now?"

"What's going on?" Church tried to peer over the Chief's shoulder, but was eventually forced to settle for looking around him. "Whoa, who broke the door?"

"Tex." The Chief growled.

"She had help."

"Yuh," Church grunted, "not surprised. I reckon," he looked the Chief up and further up. "I reckon this was her plan all along. Tex _wanted_ to goad you into chasing this thing."

"Why?"

"Why the hell not?" Church huffed irritably. "To prove she could I guess. To beat you, maybe? Or just being a bitch. Yeah, that sounds plausible."

"Well," the Chief frowned behind his visor, "I suppose we'll have to indulge her then."

"Can you walk through walls Demon?" Smirked the Arbiter, "that'd be a sight."

"I've run every possible scenario," offered Cortana. "And I can only consider three conceivable options. One: blow the door. Grenades, rockets, impressive displays of fist-oriented violence, we could do it in the end. That is if you don't mind receiving a formal complaint from Lord Hood. Or several. Two: There's an engineering vent up the side. The fusion reactors lie yonder, but it's a pretty lengthy climb up sheer walls, even for a Spartan. There is a rope hook at the top but you'd need to call someone in to attach it. Finally, Third: You could head out around the other side of the station, but that may take longer than either of the others. Those are the most viable options not counting running up the outside of the baseâ€¦ which I don't advise."

"Your call Chief." Church grinned, "shall I grab the explosives. I saw a couple of things in a cupboard behind Miss K's desk that looked kinda fun."

"Pass." The Spartan shot back. "We'll take the maintenance duct. It should be feasible, they're barely six feet across."

"You thinking a quick crab walk up the side?"

"I'm thinking it's an opportunity to leave you behind."

Cortana buzzed open the four-foot access panel, forcing the Chief to crawl through in a thoroughly undignified fashion.

Moments after he'd got his bearings, the Arbiter and Church rose alongside him. "Hmm," the Elite sniffed, "comfy enough."

"I think because it wasn't meant for three extremely large," the Spartan looked down at Church, "the equivalent of two and a half extremely large soldiers."

"Thought you could use a leg up." Said the Arbiter graciously. "Can't possibly trust such a poorly evolved life-form to scale an edifice like that now can we. I'll do it for you and drop a line down shall I?"

"That will not be necessary."

"It is only in the offerings of leveling the playing field you understand, there is no shame in receiving a bid for help." There was something distinctly difficult to place about the Arbiter's expression.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Only that in the interests of sportsmanship I wouldn't wish to see you fall behind." He disentangled something metallic from the base of

his spine. "My word, what could an Elite possibly offer?"

"That 'sâ€™| "

"Oh indeed," the Arbiter. He held up the portable gravity lift in a way in which it caught the light. "Keeping in mind it is the obligation of all Sangheili of rank to remain armed at all times."

"But," Church floundered, "aren't you not supposed to bring active weapons on ourâ€¦"

"Offensive linguistic talents aside, you are correct. So we must make do with what befits our status. Ever had one of these activated by your head?" He made an over-dramatized show of scrutinizing the cobalt Private. "No clearly not, you still have a face." With a protracted motion he set the device on the floor and realigned the settings. "I have calibrated it to maximum strength to better ascend the rise. Take it carefully."

"Of course. I'll remember this Assbiter." The Spartan stepped gracefully into the churning beam and disappeared abruptly into the void.

"Shall we?" The Arbiter smiled, "just remember that its strength is more than is usual so step don'tâ€¦"

Church leapt.

"Jump." Finished the Arbiter.

Church rocketed upwards like a MAC projectile, only to be dribbled repeatedly off the roof, spitting curses. He was pushed against the solid Titanium-A, erupting out and sliding across the metallic turf in a spray of volatile sparks. He hit the wall with a muted thud.

"Thatwasfuckingbullshit!"

"I did tell you." The Arbiter flowed out of the vent and landed like a dancer.

"Shutup."

"Tell me, was your head always that ghastly shape?"

"It's human shaped you dickhead!"

"Ah, my
mistake."

[illegible]

Tex skidded to a halt with a snarl. "Damn! This isn't going to work."

"Oh really?" Of it's own violation her gauntleted arm extended and rose, palm up. A figure swarmed up out of her hand in a flurry of

particles, aura's of ultraviolet cascading around him as he stood. He resembled a better class of supervillain, the kind sitting comfortably in a holiday home on a beach while his goons dealt with the wayward heroes. In an immaculate violet suit, the man smoothed down his greasy locks and smiled mirthlessly. "Let me guess, Allison, you don't think you have what it takes?"

"Well, there's that." Tex growled, "and I just saw the Master Chief fly past the viewing window. Oh, and don't call me Allison. You know what I'll do to you if you do, O'Malley."

The AI chuckled darkly, "of course. Now if you're sure, then may I suggest a diversionary tactic?"

"No. Trust me."

O'Malley huffed, "very well, then what is your intent?"

"Well we can't go past the fusion reactors, that would mean tackling an irate Spartan and his fanboy Elite. But I have another idea."

```
"Suck him out the airlock."  
>"Not quite."<p>
```

"Open up a wall cavity and light him with an electric current large enough to floor a small town!"

"I don't thinkâ€¦"

"Rend his body to shreds at the claws of the tortured souls of a thousand demons from the very shadow of human existence! Mwahahahaha Ha Ha Ha Ha HAHAHA HA!!"

"Let's put that in the maybe column." Tex closed her fingers over the semi-sane entity. "I have a better ideaâ€¦"

[illegible]

"Consider, soldiers, yourselves as what we have made you. The strongest c'est la guerre guarantees, I could hardly expect anyone among you to put himself forward when faced with anything less than certain death." Master Sergeant Marie Belle, French, prim and clad in a rough gray singlet-shorts combination gave a wan smile. She was, as Avery Johnson was known to state, 'one rough bitch, but I'd kill to have her on my back in a firefight.' "However," Belle continued, brushing a strand of flaxen hair behind her ear. "I would ask only that you indulge me."

The assembled soldiery all bore the same expressions of polite amusement. They all knew the dance by now and Belle was always a welcome source of entertainment.

They were ODS'T's, the lot of them, and their Captain knew Belle from countless combat scenarios.

Marie was born among the great and good, that is to say, the rich. Her mother had very stringent views on gender roles, and had brought

young Belle up to be a lady. She wished for her daughter to engage in such wholesome activities as flower arranging, horse riding and artistry. Belle had liked the horses, but sought to indulge herself in further extra-curricular activities along the lines of fencing, gun handling and regular skirmishes with the numerous street gangs of the slums.

Belle had enjoyed a lucrative career in the military, rising through the ranks like a phoenix through hardwood. Recognizing her potential the higher-ups had sought fit to install her in the Helljumper branch of the UNSC, based off her already prevalent tendency to hurl herself into the thick of it and come away laughing.

However, around 2491 Marie simply vanished off all the maps for a time, hitherto unspecified, numerous rumors as to her whereabouts had circulated before her return; one-hundred-and-fifty percent of what she had always been.

The Captain smiled pleasantly as two of his men strode forward to engage her. Though she'd long since quit the elite force the faded remnant of an ODSST tattoo still decorated her forearm. Regardless of facts, Belle was a Helljumper through and through.

Watching from the relative safety of a metal beam, Tex nodded contently to herself, ready to watch a fellow professional at work.

The Captain unknowingly mimicked the nod as the two men advanced warily on the Master Sergeant. Essentially getting your nose bloodied by Belle was fast becoming a rite-of-passage.

The more impulsive of the two made the first move, and every single ODSST in the room winced in sympathy as his gut met the steel wall of Marie's knee.

"Clapman," the Captain nudged his Corporal, "run the specs on the two recruits."

"Sir," Clapman absently backed away as a foot scythed through the intermittent space. "Both new to the platoon, subject one," he nodded at the larger of the two who was busy being introduced to the offensive power of elbows, "came out of the core following three noteworthy acts of insane bravery." The smaller man grunted as Belle proved her forehead was a great deal tougher than his. "Subject two," Clapman continued, "pegged as a born Helljumper in basic, his own staff Sergeant was scared shitless of him, sir. Very angry young man."

"Good," the Captain grunted, "now duck." Both men leant away as a boot boomeranged between them. It's owner shortly followed, the larger soldier slid passed their feet on his back. The shorter man staggered over moments later, holding up a hand in the 'halt' gesture.

"Nice work boys," Clapman patted the larger Private absently, "three and a half minutes, nearly a new company record."

The man nodded gratefully and lurched away into a cheering crowd of his peers.

Belle let her arms drop, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

Tex was the first to see the shorter of the two Privates move, saw the flicker of a combat knife appear in his hand.

He charged Belle with a snarl, slashing out at the defenseless Master Sergeant.

Belle saw the knife flash by her eye, felt its hot sting on her cheek, clearly intended to scare rather than kill.

As the soldier sought to draw his hand back Belle reached out, almost lazily and took his wrist. A twist and a wrench brought the man to his knees, as Belle's lower body pivoted.

Even Tex gritted her teeth at the crunch of Belle's sizable boot on the marine's chin.

The Captain sighed and wiped a few flecks of blood and drool off his collar, "someone get that idiot to a staff medic," he bent down and picked up a couple of small white objects, "and a good dental surgeon."

"What a waste." Belle let her shoulders finally come to rest.

The Captain simply nodded. The rogue soldier wouldn't be punished, he'd had Belle cover that for him. The felled man would clearly remember well that he'd just had his ass handed to him by a girl. Maybe in time he'd come to realize that he'd just had his life spared by a soldier.

Tex took this as her cue.

She vaulted off the beam, springs concealed in her boots absorbing most of the fall. She hit the ground in a crouch, and beamed up at the ODST captain. "Hi. Sorry to interrupt."

"Who on Earthâ€|?" The Captain blinked at her, muscles shifting beneath his shirt as he set his jaw in a tight grimace. "If this is an ONI inspection then I think you'll findâ€|"

"Save it for next month, you'll need every weasel in the book, trust me." Tex nodded over her shoulder at Belle, "and though I'm sure you're all very busy, I have a favor to ask of all of you."

"Please, what makes you think we'll help you you dumb bitâ€|!" One of the marines began, before a bullet whizzed across the top of his scalp.

Tex barely seemed to register the gun in her hand as she glared. "Don't fuck me around, really."

"Yuh." The marine felt two hairs flutter down to the ground. "Iâ€| I can't feel my brains."

"Delayed reaction," sniffed Tex, "comes from having too few. So," she smiled, the gun disappearing somewhere about her person, "can I get a hand?" There was a general milling among the ranks as a majority of the soldiers took this as a cue to depart. "Did I mention," Tex beamed like poker player dropping the final ace, "I'm up against a

Spartan? "

That got their attention.

As one the ODST's reconvened, interested at last in the potential to combat their greatest human 'enemy.'

As Tex began outlining her plans to the suddenly acutely interested group of spectators, Belle edged away uneasily.

She had to make a call.

[illegible]

"Hmmm. Hmmm."

Church's brows knitted together in annoyance.

"Hhhmmmm. Hhmmmmmmmm. Hmm."

"Godsdamnit!" Church exploded, "will you stop that goddamn humming!?"

The Arbiter looked at him, affronted, "I can't help it." He muttered, "I have a mild allergy in events of high-background radiation. It makes my Oral Clavalities vibrate."

"Well sing then!" Church spat. "Because you're driving me crazy."

"_Oh come, then, my child-ren,"_ the Arbiter warbled a melody,
"un-nite before our Lordsâ€¦|"

"Gah! I've changed my mind!"

>"Are you two lovebirds ever going to stop talking?" Cortana's irritated tone cut through the argument like a saber, "because you're giving me my first migraine ever and I have to say I'm none too thrilled."<p>

Both soldiers shuffled awkwardly with a muttered apology, like two young boys facing a wallop from Ma.

The Arbiter's humming slowly faded away as it was overwhelmed by the deep thrum of the fusion core.

At the head of the three-man procession, the Master Chief turned. "Too much further and we'll be right in it. Think the thing's flame-retardant?"

"I think you're retardant." Muttered Church, who'd so far done a great deal more walking than he was used to. Anything beyond a trot to the fridge may as well have been a nature hike.

"I thinkâ€¦" The Master Chief paused. He stood motionless, helmet raised to a vent.

With a grunt, the Arbiter leapt; planting his hoof firmly on the Spartan's braced shoulder as his arm vanished into the darkness of

the aperture. The Chief backed off and the Arbiter slid down the wall, a long black object clutched in his claws.

With a squeal (which the Arbiter would later fervently deny), the elite and his package fell to the ground. "Aha!" The Arbiter crowed triumphantly, rolling and pinning his prize beneath his bulk. "It was you!" He roared, "you all along! You're the murderer!"

"Dumb-freakin-ass!" A forehead collided with the Arbiter's mandibles, making the Elite wince and withdraw enough for the brunette in his talons to squirm into a less undignified position.

"Iâ€¦ I know it was youâ€¦" The Arbiter growled with less conviction.

"And I know you've been reading way too much Agatha Christie!" The giggly girl from maintenance glared up at the Sangheili, "do you have any idea how long I've been pissing about in there looking for thatâ€¦ that _thing_?! Then you come along andâ€¦ andâ€¦" She frowned, "what do you mean murderer?"

"Uhrm," the Arbiter backed off her. "Perhaps you are right, human literature is, ah heh heh, addictive despite your known intellectual shortcomings."

"Bite me larper." The girl managed to clamber to her feet, in spite of receiving some measure of unseen resistance. She stretched. "Well, that was invigorating to say the least. Just call ahead next time you plan on doing that, yeah?" She glanced at Church. "Who's this?"

>"Buhâ€¦" Church stared, his mouth gaping. He twitched.
"Buhâ€¦"<p>

"This is Private First-Class Church," offered Cortana's voice from the nearby speakers, "heavens only know why."

"Buhâ€¦" Church agreed.

"And he's our attachÃ©."

"Buhâ€¦ buh, buh."

"Yeah," the girl carefully closed her arms over her chest, "and I think he likes my resistance-free synthetic maintenance ensemble."

"Skintightâ€¦" Church panted, "so veryâ€¦ skintightâ€¦"

"I have to maximize my size advantage." The maintenance girl shot the Chief a disparaging look. Her black, glistening bodysuit did indeed affix itself perfectly to her contours. Faint static discharges flared across her frame.

"Quite high-end equipment," noted the Master Chief with a quirked finger.

"Thanks." The girl did a frictionless twirl, forcing Church to slump, gasping, against the wall. "And it's all for something I don't think really exists."

"Why so close to the fusion reactor?" The Arbiter queried. "That makes little sense."

"Warmth." The girl shrugged, "what do scared little, possibly-real, animals need? Food, water, and a place by the fire. Basest inhuman instincts. Well, that and," she nodded at Church, "whatever _he's_ thinking about."

"ONI are unnerved," said Cortana, "they've gone far enough to send in a Spec-Op's soldier who I really doubt is reserved for the rank and file."

"'It followed me home.'" The Master Chief muttered faintly.

"Huh?" The maintenance girl spared him a glance, "what you say Chief?"

"Nothing," said the Spartan absently, "just a thoughtâ€|"

"Well keep thinking." Piped in Cortana, "fresh idea's would help, because I'm out."

The giggly maintenance girl sighed and kicked at the floor irritably, nearly causing herself to commit to a faceplant. She rallied, and glared at the Master Chief. Maybe feelings of awe andâ€| something she only ever discussed with her psychiatrist (five-hundred years of evolution had left _them_ veritably unchanged) seemed to be clouding her perception since he'd arrived. Not love, not hate but something that gave her a strong desire to make him look very silly. Not that that squid-face and the 'blue church of Me' were any better. But at least the Arbiter was generally polite.

"Can you tell?" She pressed the Elite, "you're the only one here who'll spot it."

"Spotâ€| what?" The Arbiter snaked his head in her direction and cocked a brow-ridge.

She giggled, and covered her eyes.

Rightâ€|

Church was feeling aggravated by now, that _girl_ was clearly flaunting herself at him and if Tex knewâ€| well, better not to think about that. The Chief was looking lost, Cortana seemed to have bugged out and the Arbiter now had his eyes closed and looked like he'd gone to sleep.

The Elite's eyes snapped open, "ah. I see now. Or not, as it were." Moving with new purpose, he strode towards a lower vent, reached down and snagged something out. "Ha! The child was right, I thought I smelt something."

The object was flat, round and the vague brown that even optimist's would class as 'kind of a muddy color.'

"A wedge of 'guaranteed' Thirst-approved beef." Offered the maintenance girl, "with one-percent total meat product. Hungry animal, or elaborate prank?"

"The plot thickens."

"Sad but true."

"Buhâ€| "

"How long did you know that was there?" Cortana's voice echoed around the dank hallway.

"Long enough, that's what twigged me in the first place."

"Buh!"

"Hah," the Arbiter smirked at the Master Chief, "every sense heightened but a sense of smell, tut tut, you in your living coffin."

"Buh! Buh buh!"

"Oh, by the grace of the Forerunners what now?"

Church pointed and squeaked. "Bâ€| BUH!"

As if someone had triggered a pulley-system that connected the other three via their heads, they simultaneously followed his pointing finger.

Far above them, wedged in a corner between wall and roof, a shadow moved.

It pounced, landing heavily on the Arbiter and forcing his helmet down over his eyes. Before even a Spartan could react, the thing exploded like a Trip mine off the Sangheili's scalp, hitting the Chief between the eyes and scraping its claws over in his visor. As he reached up to bat it away, the thing sprang, eliciting a squeal from Church as he caught a hold of the nearest item of comfort.

The maintenance girl slapped him, and made a dive for the creature as it disappeared into the vent with the synthetic meat.

She got in up to the waist when the Chief caught her ankle.

"Ah! What the hell're you doing?"

"Helping." With a thrust, the Chief sent her hurtling into the void.

As her screams died away, he straightened. "She won't catch it." He told the others with absolute certainty.

"But where will it go now it's been found out?"

"Somewhere dark, cool, safe. To hide."

Church felt it time to redeem himself. He pointed dramatically and exclaimed, "to the cool dark room!"

"To the dojo."

"Ohâ€¦
yeah."

"Idiot."

[illegible]

The 'dojo,' as it was consistently referred to by marines or, more recently 'Belle's House of Horrors' was indeed cool, and dark, and empty.

"Hello?" Church called out. "Helloooo!"

"Aaand, you've scared it off. Well done." Cortana shot from a nearby pedestal.

"Ohâ€¦ sorry."

"How you fleshy things ever get anything done is beyond me."

The Arbiter, however, lurked appreciatively among the racks of weaponry, all of which were of the up-close-and-personal vein and all, in his opinion quite impressive for the work of such a primitive species. He drew a long staff off one of the racks and twirled it inexpertly. "Now this is inter-species heaven, what is this place? It is not like that gymnasium thing with all of its uncomfortable devices."

"Good observation. This is slightly more specialized. And gruesome. What goes on in here never makes it up to the surface."

The Arbiter chuckled, "oh my, it seems young Church is shaking. How embarrassing."

"I'm not scared. I'mâ€¦ just a little pissed."

"You're telling me." The Arbiter set the staff down and amiably prodded a large, bladed object. "Subtle things aren't you? Now what do we seek here?"

The Master Chief prodded an access panel, a segment of mirrored wall folded in on itself. "Not so empty."

The Arbiter and Church followed him, blinking in the sudden sterile light emanating from the ice-white walls. Numerous stalls filled the area from end-to-end, excepting the one fifth of the sector that made up a large clearing beneath flickering orange lights. The washroom-cum-medical bay was all but empty.

All but.

Master Sergeant Marie Belle padded towards the three, delicately toweling down her hair. "Master Chief " She began.

"Oh come on!" Church flung his hands in the air. "For crying out loud, this isn't even fair any more!" He turned and stalked away, muttering a list of expletives with regards to the female psyche. Belle watched him go.

"What, exactly, is his problem?" She hung the towel off her neck and cocked a sculpted brow. "Hmph, I suppose you are not here to take a shower, _non_? You wish to know about Tex is that correct?"

"Guessing games aside," the Master Chief had enough presence of mind to rip off a salute, which Belle shot an amused look. The Chief continued, unperturbed, "we're not after Tex, exactly, Sergeant. We're here for the creature."

"Oh, more fun." Marie brightened, "Miss Tex was in here questioning just that. Yes, she has an armed force of ODST's banging on the walls up above trying to drive the thing towards her waiting embrace."

The Arbiter snorted angrily, "what a dishonorable course."

"Oh?" Belle fixed him with a glare, "and who is escorting the Master Chief, o' slaughterer of many?"

"Wellâ€¦ fine," the Arbiter conceded, "but I am no army."

"Quite so." Said Belle briskly. "So I have seen to it that the odds are swayed into a fairer state. I have always had the utmost respect for you, Spartan. Can you live with yourself to accept my help?"

"â€¦"

"The other option is to lose."

"Done. Hit me."

"I knew you'd say that." Cortana's voice sighed from on high.

"Funny," Belle smiled, "because that may as well happen." She thumped her fist on the nearest stall. "Your move, Miss 'Embrax."

Four spidery fingers grasped the top of the door, gently pulling across the bonded plastic portal. Eva stood in the frame, the top of the stall just brushing her head. She had a pot, nearly as big as her torso balanced on her hip, and condensation dribbled down her snout, hanging precariously off the end of her mandibles. She steamed. "Had to keep it warm, hey? Nothing like a spattering of hot water to really get things going, gods I feel great why don't we have any of these? Oh, hello Arbiter, can you ever remember when I last felt this good because I certainly can't." The elation appeared to subside at last, "oh, right, that thing you wanted me to do Belle?" She looked to Marie, who nodded. "My pleasure." Eva bowed politely to the Master Chief, "I'm willing to help in any way I can. Now if you would kindly lower your shieldsâ€¦"

In hindsight the Master Chief should have seen it coming. He was _trained_ to see it coming. And yet, in the face of Eva's amber gaze he felt himself go into automatic. Perhaps, at a later date he would be able to write it off as a lesser known power of the Sangheili species, some manner of mind submission he hadn't counted on. Maybe he could further the lie and claim he found Eva endearing. Regardless, the Master Chief lowered his shieldsâ€¦

sake of running. Oh, this was the way all battles should be fought, one force after another, another force fleeing because the one force is chasing. And catching up.

She brushed past a couple of sightseeing Jackals, slid beneath the raised arm of a Hunter and burst clean through an AI that paused too long, feeling the rush of static as her hair stood on its end.

This was it, the thrill ofâ€¦

"_Not getting ahead of ourselves are we?"_ O'Malley's omnipotent voice broke through her adrenaline-fueled reverie. "_Slow down, you're running too fast."_

"Bite me."

"_Would that I could, however at this rate my dear you will trample a good few bystanders. And while I, personally would find that hilarious I doubt Miss Keyes would find so much to laugh at."_

"Almostâ€¦ got itâ€¦" Tex panted, her fingertips almost brushing the spine of her reluctant quarry.

"_Adrenaline bomb bugging out," _O'Malley drawled, "_energy declining. Brain functions slowing. Bladderâ€¦ filling."_

"Gi'â€¦ one mor'â€¦"

"_Braindeath projection. Negative. Slow down."_

"Alâ€¦ gt 't."

"_Heartrate declining, lungs straining, di-di-di-verting pri-primary AI power to nerve endings-ings-ings."_

"Thanks." Tex grunted.

"_Enough to stop you."_ O'Malley's fading voice hissed, "_now slow down or I'll distill your soul through the fires of oblivion and turn your body into a footstool!"_

"Fine." Tex skidded to a halt.

As if on cue, her hairy quarry gave one last shudder and collapsed on the polished metal.

"_Looks like it was fear of you that gave it wings in the first place, how very entertaining, mwahahaha."_

"I think so." Tex stalked over to the collapsed creature with a barely concealed limp. "Your mine now bitâ€¦ Oh what the hell?!"

Lying at her feet, blue bubbles popping out the end of his methane filter, the Grunt ultra twisted its head painfully and glared. "What you, stupid?"

It was covered with dirt, and bedecked in reeds and grasses. "Stupid monkey." The Unggoy barked and began gathering up the dropped reeds.

"What me do wrong this time, Sangheili say 'take that away you stupid, no mess up hallways,' now look me just go everywhere!"

The little alien was babbling now, something Tex really didn't have time for. But the chase had left her almost dead on her feet and it would be a waste not to know. "Whyâ€| why are you carryingâ€| reeds?"

"They for my cousin," the Unggoy hefted them into a clasp on his methane fin, "honeyreeds, see? For flavor."

"Flavorâ€|"

"In food stupid." The Unggoy held out its paw. At first Tex thought it wanted to shake, but then realized it was requesting the stalk she'd absent-mindedly picked up. As the Grunt snatched it back, he said, "me Knoitt, who you?"

Not 'who you, Excellency,' Tex noted. "Tex."

"Hokay." Now hidden beneath the thatch the Grunt did indeed resemble a hairy little goblin.

"But why did you run from me?"

"Because you chase _me_."

"Ahâ€|" That actually made sense.

"That it?" Knoitt leered at her. Tex took a step back. His eyesâ€|

The Grunt was mad. Worse, _everyone_ _lived_ with some degree of insanity, it was a trademark of the human psyche. Knoitt had shot clean through madness and emerged in the cold recesses of sanity, which was very similar except a great deal creepier.

Ice blue fires burned in the depths of those eyes.

"Shut up O'Malley," Tex rapped the gauntlet with her knuckle, "it's not _that_ bad."

"_Well_ forgive me for trying liven up the proceedings, but the little thing is clearly one pin short of an active grenade."_

"Who you talking to lady?" The Grunt demanded.

"Never you mind." Tex glared, "now you've wasted enough of my time I really should be going."

"Who waste whose time?" Knoitt sniffed, "me no need to be killed everywhere me go, me get enough of that back in barracks. Fine, me take this to Nami then go sniff out strange creature for nice Miss Keyes."

"Yeah, whatever." Tex huffed, "see you next disaster."

She turned and stalked away as haughtily as she could with a marked limp, fully aware of what this chase had cost her.

Knoitt watched her go, shrugged and waddled down the hall.

There was the sound of inexplicable running feet behind him. He turned as Tex rounded the corner, gasping for air. She leant against the wall, clasping her chest. "Waitâ€¦ you said you're going to do _what?_"

[illegible]

"At any rate I am not enthusiastic by the reports I've heard."

"Oh yeah?" Church glanced round at the Arbiter, "this got something to do with all the catcalls?"

"In a way, yes." The Arbiter smiled, "I will admit that there is a bit of a _foul air_ about things."

"Yes," Church grinned, "I thought I _smelled_ something."

"I'd actually say," Cortana smirked from a nearby console, "that there's even some confusion among the `_rank_`. It `_reeks_` of something truly `_disgusting_`."

"You don't score any points for that one," the Arbiter sniffed, "it was a little obvious."

Ten meters further down the hall, the Master Chief had had enough. "Right," he turned, "next one to make a pun about my odor gets a shotgun shell between the eyes, got that?"

"I suppose," the Arbiter shrugged, "but you are really quite offensive. It's all I can do to stand this far away, actually. Have you considered hosing off?"

The Master Chief had, if fact considered just that. This close to the warmth of the fusion generators, the meat juices had solidified into a third skin that stunk to high heaven. Marines had melodramatically fainted in the hallways, Elites (with their keen sense of smell) had fled at the stink of him. Jackal's were abandoning the Cairo on mass.

If he had known his new meatshield was this effective against the Covenant he would have had one commissioned long ago. He didn't intend on washing it off, however, something he'd seen in Eva 'Embrax' eyes suggested that would be a mistake. She had very expressive, and threatening, eyes.

Well, gremlin or no gremlin he'd stick with it.

Just as long as Brutes continued to keep well away from the Cairo, that was all he asked. Smelling like this he may as well have had 'chew toy' plastered across his chest.

"I'll get started shall I?" The Chief sighed.

"If you would."

"Before we all die of boredom." Church added.

"Right," the Chief rapped a knuckle against the nearest vent.

An interesting fact about the universe and laws of causality is that things seldom go entirely as intended. Consider, if you would, a ringworld that's sole intent is the defeat of a parasitic lifeform at the greatest expense in the universe, the last thing you'd expect to find is a perfectly preserved armed force of said parasite hidden deep within the construct. And you'd never think that same error could ever have been made over the other seven ringworlds resulting in a cataclysm that nearly brought about the end of the world and, in fact, life as we know it.

That sort of thing just doesn't happen.

Of course, in keeping with these domineering laws it was only feasible for a feral cat to discount an 'all you can eat' meat bar in favor of something inherently more rat-like.

Church screamed as something rabid, spitting and apparently composed entirely of knives launched itself from the nearest vent and affixed itself to his face.

The tiny animal, now content that it had Church pinned in a corner, was batting him with its paw to see what other funny noises he made.

It was about this time that Tex and Knoitt rounded the corner and caught the tableau.

"There, lady!" Knoitt pointed, "me find it, see?"

"Yes, yes, nice work," Tex pushed past him and grinned, "and nice going Church, I never thought you had it in you. And it looks like _I_ win." She beamed at the Master Chief.

"Oh I beg to differ," the Arbiter spat, "that Church thing was with us the entire time, he is _our_ ally."

"Try double-agent," Tex growled, "he's _my_ boyfriend, he's _my_ property ergo his catch is _mine_ by default."

"Doesn'tâ€¦ anyone care I'm inâ€¦ extreme pain?" Church groaned. "Oh god he's got my liver! He's got my fucking liver!"

"Spoils of war, he's _mine_." Tex hissed.

"I need that liver, I never finished breaking it in yet!"

The Master Chief brandished a finger under Tex' nose. "I don't lose."

"_Take that away buffoon,"_ Tex hissed, "_or I'll take your head as a paperweight and resurrect your body just so you can watch me kill you again!"_ She clapped her gauntlet over her mouth, "I am so sorry about that. But my point still stands."

"Then let us decide," the Arbiter grabbed a passing bystander who, as the law of causality demanded, happened to be passing at a crucial moment, "and what do youâ€¦ oh, hello Eva."

It yowled.

"Zombie cat," Sergeant Johnson, within the crowd of marines and Sangheili, quipped. No one laughed.

"How did this happen?" From a pedestal, Cortana raised her holographic eyebrows at Hood, "I have deduced at least two-dozen possible theories, each one more unlikely than the one before. Foremost among them is this; That Jonesy, during the Covenant incursion of the Pillar of Autumn, had wedged himself in a corner somewhere out of the fighting with innate survival sense, and the Covenant deemed him too unimportant to terminate on sight during their purge of the crew."

"That's true," added Taso, "we Split-chins are rather stupid like that."

"From managing to survive the crash, he probably lived off of the cafeteria food which the Covenant wouldn't touch with a ten-foot spork. The Flood must have seen him as unnecessary for consumption as he's hardly bigger than an infection form. I could only guess that he received his unique condition from the Flood spores generated during their attack. As for his escape from Installation 04 Well, anything goes. Came off with the Chief's Longsword, a Pelican, hitched a ride with the Covenant, attached himself to a roving Sentinel Even I couldn't hypothesize that, sir."

"Granted. Regardless he is here now and if he poses a threat to our array"

"Ramifications understood, sir."

"This station shall be quarantined then." Hood sighed, "until we can be sure there is no chance of an outbreak I want all travel to and from the Cairo ceased. Until this station has been scoured top to bottom and the entire crew checked off for signs of Flood infection there is to be no possible contact with the outside world, effective immediately. That includes you Shipmaster."

"Of course," Taso acknowledged, "I will assist however I may."

"Good. And to ensure no further threat, the cat shall be incinerated."

"Oh you can't fucking do that!"

Like everyone else in the foyer, Private Church glanced around to see who had had the audacity to yell out like that at Lord Hood.

He realized, with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, that it had been him.

"Um" He noticed that the entire room had turned to stare at him, including Hood, who's expression was unreadable. "Well uh it's just I think that you can't really just burn him for you know being a cat and junk. I mean, if I was a cat I'd kind of hate to be brought in under these y'know, circumstances and stuff so I er I sort of think that uh"

She sighed, picked up the data-pad and set it down at her feet. Her authentic Gurruck pencil-mug shortly followed it, as well as an assortment of other semi-important items. Miranda neatly piled up a swathe of papers and set them down on the floor.

She moved her chair back, and waited.

The vent gave a final creak, and the giggly girl from maintenance toppled out, landing in a heap on Miranda's desktop.

"Where am I?"

Keyes sighed again, "right, the last time I had this dream you didn't have a nose, what gives?"

"Huh?"

"Where are your people keeping the Prince of the cupcake kingdom?"

"What?"

"Ah, so this is real then. I was afraid of that."

17. Peer Maintenance

_So it was that my Muse finally crawled back through the door, bracken and bits of egg in her rangy mane. She had just returned from her liaison to Mt. Everite to speak with the guru of all things desktop-related and then some, bringing with her the news of great futures ahead. The revelations were many, the drinks were few. We were surrounded by the type of people who shout 'Jubilation' and mean it. Then words were said, places were visited, stuff was stuffed and I wasn't allowed to see her for a couple of weeks. _

And Now I'm back and what I am, pretentiously trying to say is thank you, to all long-term fans of the fiction, if you are returning. And welcome, to all newcomers since.

To those who doubt, yes, soon there shall be a Red vs Blue chapter, promise, whole teams this time.

_Also, sorry Spog the Brick in The Wall but I borrowed something from Anthony :). _

Disclaimer: I own nothing relating to the Halo universe.

Exclainer: Woohoo, I'm back baby!

****Peer Maintenance****

The messenger backed to the edge of the precipice, his prying talon dislodging a shard of earth.

He heard it clatter down the walls for a _very _long time.

He swallowed, "all the Queen requires is a simple offering of dirt

and brittle bits of twig. A token of submission to the will of the great Nectar."

"Submission?" The King chuckled darkly, his armored carapace gleaming in the half-light. "Well that's a bit of a problem. We have our reputation to consider. At any rateâ€¦ dirt and twigs?" His eyes flashed and he raised a broadsword of glistening salt crystals.

"Mad!" The messenger backed away as far as he dared, hanging at an angle over the void. "You're all insane!"

"Dirt and twigsâ€, it's earth and air, you'll find," the sword barely wavered, "and I'm sure there will be plenty of both down there."

"No one threatens a messenger."

The King considered this. "You bring this tithe to the steps of my throne, with the thoraxes of my conquered brethren in your company? You threaten my people, with slavery to your maggot beds? No."

The messenger tried pleading, against all hope. "You have no right. This is madness!"

The king lowered his sword. His mandibles twitched in a half-smile. He turned and surveyed the assembled cohorts at his back, their expressions a mirror to his own. He eyed the messenger again. His smile departed. "Madness? THIS IS ANTHILL NUMBER FIVE!"

[illegible]

The girl from maintenance with a light-bubbly laugh stared morosely into the ant tubes and sighed. They were a complex array of interlocking glass orbs and tubes, built below an even more complicated assemblage of metal pipes, interlocking wires and sound systems.

"Anthill number five," she reiterated into her memo stick. "No discernable change." She tapped the glass, "the ants continue to exhibit the same primal signs of limited intellect and savagery. Will attempt system seven tomorrow." She thought for a moment, then added, "someone has put army ants into my bulb. I suspect silly buggers."

"Someone call my name?" The maintenance girl heaved a savage breath as Private O'Riley ambled over. Perhaps the cafeteria was not the place for her research, but she had assumed the constant torrents of cleaners and stern men in hazard suits would put off all but the most die-hard eaters. Either O'Riley was one of those or all of her hypotheses were complete crap.

"Hey, what's this?" O'Riley leered into the maze of ant's nests.
"Heh, those ones look like they got little spears!"

"No," the girl rolled her eyes, "to those untrained in insect anatomy," she flushed, "ants may look advanced but their tool use is very basic. I did catch them making bridges at one point, but they'd just as well use their own body-parts to do it."

"Sure." O'Riley wasn't sure her knowledge of insect species was any better than his, but free entertainment was free entertainment. "So what do you do with them?"

One of the biggest foibles of the maintenance girl, aside from the obvious, was her attitude to her work. That is, her assumption that everyone else was as informed on it as she was. Occasionally she picked up on this, whereupon her attitude became that of a harassed parent talking to a child who treated listening as a threat of violence. Currently she was at stage former. "It's sonic treatment of insectile intellect, further advancement of higher brain functions through prolonged exposure to cerebral influences."

"Buh?"

The girl sighed and shifted mental track on lane: latter. "I'm using sound to make them smarter."

"Bullshit," O'Riley's rapid-fire response put her somewhat off-guard, an unaccustomed experience, "you mean to tell me you're combating billions of years of evolution with a day's worth of easy listening, and," he forced extra stress into the syllables, "_we're paying you to do this?"_

"I'm a Maintenance Tech you ignorant pig," she colored, "this _is_ my _job_."

"Yeah?" O'Riley tapped the glass of the enclosure, "and just this morning I were training dung beetles to cart Warthogs around the field. I mean, all the stuff gets shaken out of the glove compartments when they're rolling the suckers back in but, hey, that's service for ya."

"_Hey nob-for-brains, we hates it we ye taps the glass ye great shiny-faced swine!"_

O'Riley blinked and lowered his hand.

"_Aye, that's better ye daft bastard."_

The Maintenance girl glowered, "ass. You have no idea what I'm about to accomplish. I am revolutionizing the evolution of the mechanized subordinates!" She beamed, but O'Riley's blank stare forced her to add, "I'm using this stuff to make the Guard Robots smarter, Chester."

"Them?" O'Riley glanced around. As ever, the automatons had taken up station around the walls, and were doing what they did best, nothing. Multiple questions rose to the forefront of his mind, but only two really presented themselves in way he could coherently express. "Howâ€¦? Whyâ€¦?"

"By exciting their baser functions with sonic waves I think I can make up the connections the other techies can't get externally. All I have to do is get it to work on these ants," she thumped the roof of the enclosure for emphasis, "cos they're pretty much smarter than the robots anyway, so it won't be _such_ a leap forward."

O'Riley stared. He rationalized thusly; "soâ€¦ let me get this

straight. You're trying to do an experiment you don't understand, and use it in a way that likely won't work, to reactivate a disused group of automatons built primarily for war," he sighed, "in _peacetime?_"

O'Riley suppressed the urge to shudder as the tiny creatures scurried past the screen with captured red-ant women slung over their shoulders. "You want to turn down the frequency?"

Fuming, the maintenance girl rose to her feet, prepared to give O'Riley a detailed analysis on why, no, she did not want to change the frequency and what he could do with his unnecessary dissection of her rudimentary goals, where he could stick it and what he could do once it was stuck there but she was saved the trouble.

"Riles!" A voice inlaid with a permanent pout simpered across the cafeteria. The nearest cleaners turned, and parted for the newcomer, almost on impulse.

Oh gods, the maintenance girl buried her face in her hands, but parted her fingers enough to watch the vision cross the lunchroom. Yes, there it was, the confident swagger of a stiletto model, the uniform a size too small and ironed enough that it bloody _clung_ with every bloody step. The height? A good 5' 8", tall and leggy, but short enough not to emasculate O'Riley. And the hair, unreal scarlet and hanging in curling tresses down to the very base of her spine, not that anyone would ever tell _her_ what was what in military regime.

"Hi Riles," the girl halted by table, a pleasant smile on her perfectly sculpted lips. _Sculpted from what source I wonderâ€¦|_

The Maintenance girl cut across the Private as he made to rise. "Ah, Silver Penny, what a pleasure."

"Yes, um," Penny extended a languorous hand that stopped just short of touching the girl, "whoever you are." She flashed O'Riley a dazzling smile, "Riles where were you, I waited all morning and you never showed up."

"Yes, we should talk about that." The Maintenance girl pulled an elongated penknife out of one of her many pockets and extracted something that appeared to serve no useful purpose. She waved it authoritatively under Penny's nose. "I'm going to peg a guess here, because I am positively certain that Chester would never give up on an opportunity to spend every hour worshipping your perfect, and likely stolen, form." O'Riley at least had the decency to look embarrassed. "And so I'll estimate that you forgot that he can't receive information transmitted straight into his mind via a crystal network?"

"Umâ€¦|" Penny's exquisite lips formed into a perfect pout. "Excuse me?"

"Oh no trouble. In fact you're assisting my report of human response in a digital format, so I thank you."

"You are truly a strange creature." Penny cupped her chin in her hand and laughed delightedly. "I could almost return the favor to you."

"Charmed, I'm sure." The Maintenance girl shook her head with a long sigh. "I guess I have about as much chance understanding AI's as I do these ants." She flung a blanket over the nest with a shrug. "So that's a cheery thought."

The Maintenance Girl squinted thoughtfully at the AI. Foehammer? Under the right light, the set of her jaw, the lips, the general stance and shape of the body, it all looked like the deceased Echo-419 pilot. Butâ€¦ different. More like a perfectly realized version of her. Clearly Penny hadn't been designed that way, but the poor deluded girl probably thought it was everything O'Riley wanted.

Maybe that. And a little more then was comfortable judging by O'Riley's steadily reddening face. "Oh Riles," Penny seemed to notice him again, "come here." Original issues momentarily postponed Penny flung herself at the stunned Private in a vomit-inducing display that she probably got from a sitcom.

"Ugh," the maintenance girl groaned, "can you not do that here? Some of us have standards you know."

"Like someone other than yourself?" O'Riley grinned with the smugness of one with two semi-solid holographic arms around his neck. "Isn't it about time you ensnared the Master Chief or something?" He laughed and leant in towards Silver Penny for a simulated kiss.

"Hold it." The maintenance girl snarled, "I didn't want to play this card but your sick little fling is entirely against my religion."

"Religion?" This seemed to suitably stun O'Riley that he actually dropped his girlfriend. The silly creature remained hovering a foot off the ground before she remembered herself and fell into a boneless heap. "You're not _religious._"

"Ow, Riles that hur-urt!"

"Yeah?" The girl reached into her shirt and tugged out a slim chain. A silver microphone stand glittered on the end and swung against her palm. "Then my mother must have wasted years on my upbringing."

"I've often felt that." O'Reiley sighed. "But what does my relationship have to do withâ€¦ this?"

"I believe the line between man and machine has been drawn ages back by the foundation master of the rock." The girl huffed. "Under no circumstances should man abuse his station by forming a relationship with such. So it is written."

"Bullshit. And just what phony religion is this?"

"Silly man," the girl grinned, "I'm a _Presleytarian_, born and bred. Hail to the King, baby."

[illegible]

"I don't suppose there's anything I can say that would cheer you up is there?"

"You could start with 'sorry' and work your way up. It's not hard, I'll start you off sorrrrâ€¦"

"Would that work?" The Maintenance girl paused with her hands on her hips. "Come on O'Riley it's not that bad."

"Not that bad? You've frozen my girlfriend!"

"So, just reboot her."

"Reâ€¦ reboot her?!?" O'Riley snarled, "how do you reboot a person?"

"Well a) she's not a person." Said the girl matter-of-factly. "And b) I'm sure she'll reset on her own, so what's the rush? I gave her a lot to think about."

"Too much I think," O'Riley glared miserably over his shoulder. Penny floated down the hall behind him, her face locked in a frown and her finger glued to her lip in an overly stereotyped thinking pose. "I'm sure there's a rulebook somewhere that says you aren't supposed to discuss made-up religion with an AI."

"It's not made up." The girl snarked. "My family have been in it for generations."

"A cult then."

"O'Riley youâ€¦ you ain't nothing but a hound dog!"

"Be that as it may." O'Riley kicked at the dust as Penny slowly rotated upside down. "I don't mess with _your_ love life."

"Only because I haven't ensnared the bugger yet. Give it time."

The maintenance girl grinned weakly and O'Riley at least took that as some form of apology. "We'll head down to the tech's and get her fixed up."

"We?" The girl gave him the kind of look she probably reserved for disobedient ants. "I don't remember signing on to this cruise."

"You should. It's your fault."

The girl bit back a retort and kept walking. Truth be told she couldn't help herself as far as an AI was concerned. She'd been on enough team projects by now to have a working idea of the typical dumb AI framework. The 'smarts' like Cortana were a bit of a hurdle, and you'd need a level of intellect somewhere in the region of Catherine Halsey to match them take-for-take. The 'dumbs' were something fun though, and it was always a new challenge seeing how long you could push them until something broke. But what was Silver Penny anyway? Clearly she had enough free will to run by, which must make her one of the specialized dumbs. An auto-pilot, perhaps? They had a bit of a rapport with their crew to mimic something approaching friendship. How much processor power did it take to maintain a

Prophet looked in the glare of human stage lighting. _A lifetime of inactivity, they must be born corpses._ "That, Prophet, was the official third human inducted into our religion."

"Our religion?" The Prophet's eyes flickered in amusement. "And what, pray, would that entail?"

Tusa shrugged her elegant shoulders. "As they say; 'not the foggiest.' I assume the human just wants to pray a bit and earn a little piece of mind by groveling at the feet of a different set of gods."

"I've never inducted an _Elite_, " said Wonder slyly.

Tusa, swallowing rising bile, managed to choke out, "we were _born_ it, Prophet. The day my Mother held me and swore I was a passing resemblance to great aunt Ethi I have walked in their shadow." _And once held a tea party with them before dear big brother Taso caught me and pointed out they weren't imaginary,_ she mused. _The Forerunners still owe me three cookies._ She shook her head to clear it of such thoughts. "I'm sorry noble one, but humans have a tendency to, as they put it, 'jump on the bandwagon.' I've no doubt you'll be seeing more recruits before long."

"Bah."

"They'll need religious guidance." Tusa's voice was melodious, enrapturing.

The Prophet's ears perked up. "You don't say. Well I suppose it wouldn't be too much work to ensure accessible board on this vessel, I could always see my Honor Guard bring in my affects and|"

"Honor Guard?" Tusa smirked, "now really, are you still so paranoid?"

"Ah|" Wonder blanched, "he's a| human. Called Eugene." He straightened and glared, "a point I could make that your blasted Councilors banned me from having anything else I might add."

"We just don't want you abusing your lack of power." Tusa bowed and turned away. "Now, not that this liaison hasn't been fun, I fear I must move out. Places to be, matters to settle, males to woo." _Brothers to avoid._

Tusa stalked away.

"Lady 'Falana." Tusa stiffened. She refused to turn, refused to meet the Prophets smirk. "Tell Grae 'Negrulee I was very impressed with his report on the forges of Ivaldi. You should refer to Zealot 'Ratanalee about this, I imagine he has been looking to promote him for some time. One wouldn't want to waste this opportunity."

"No| Holy One." _Damn, damn, damnity damn!_ "I shall be sure to| relay this." She lengthened her stride and vanished down the corridor. _Prophets! Blast the lot of them! How in the hells does he always know? First the Arbiter, that smug little smirk Wonder gets whenever he catches him around Commander Keyes. He also caught Fuka's eye with alarming regularity. And admittedly everyone could guess Eva's intended machinations with Taso, but Wonder was undoubtedly the

first to make the assumption. And now this._

Tusa tried to put the thought out of her mind, Wonder was no threat to secrecy, though his smugness was aggravating.

Tusa flounced away, trying to put him out of mind.

Keen, it was often expressed by the older political Elites with regards to Tusa 'Falana, she was far too keen. Always the first with new proposals to pester the Council, always pouncing on the first new trend that swept the Sangheili fashions, and always over-stepping her boundaries.

Her mother had brought her up like that. She'd forced into Tusa the idea that only true failure was not making the effort, and if you pushed forwards as far as you could you'd always have less to slide back. Her father had simply looked at her, snorted and said, "you'll do." That was about high-praise as far as she could recall.

Tusa 'Falana, always first to the meetings, always dressed for finery, always capable of reading every other Sangheili face like scripted parchment. The sudden removal of so many Elite Councilors by Tartarus had left a large political vacuum, one that Tusa's gaudy outfits were all too happy to fill.

Not to say everyone was quite so pleased with her success.

And, _aha_, to, as they say, speak of the devil.

Heda 'Felsolee was slouched in the hallway up ahead, his mandibles pressed to together, his face white with fury.

Clearly he'd picked up one more human to accost with his presence, the worrisome git.

Tusa 'Falana was not above a direct assault on the libido. In the battle of the sexes Tusa was a walking trebuchet. "Ohhhh Heda 'Felsolee!" She simpered, her delicate hooves barely nicking the metal as she made her way over to the feud. "What a lovely evening to meet you here of all places, why by the glow off your brow I was almost overtaken by the belief the sun had risen twice this day. Tell me," she reached the tableau, pawing daintily at his armored chest, "why so formal?"

The scene seemed to have settled pending her arrival. Heda had frozen stiffly, hardly blinking as he regarded her through the corner of one beady eye. The human girl dangling from his fist gave her a meek smile, still clearly considering whether or not she was saved or looking at a future of feeding through a straw. There was the young man, hand on his sidearm. And the strange AI floating horizontally from the wall with emotions flicking over her face like a stop-motion film.

"And what do you want, strumpet?" Heda glowered, breaking the spell. "Has it slipped your notice, perhaps, that I am not in any mood for your behavior. Don't think it has been passed over, Miss 'Falana," Heda put extra emphasis on the human title, ending it was a hiss, "that your actions within the Council have not gone entirely unnoticed. Tell me, 'Falana, when you are at last boiled alive in the waters of your own sins, who shall you turn to then?"

"Heda," Tusa huffed irritably, "firstly I think that's tremendously impolite. And secondly I don't see how you can belittle me so when you are holding a human in a manner that many people may interpret as malicious."

"How is it your business?"

"Aggressive use of girl, I should think it would be yes."

"Thisâ€¦ filth." Heda snarled. "Surely you would not begrudge me one attempt at reconciliation." He smiled slyly, "was your father not stationed on Unyielding Hierophant when they blew it up?"

"That is none of your concern." Tusa's expression turned feral, "drop it now or Forerunners help me I shall bite you!"

"This is horrific misconductâ€¦"

Tusa bared her teeth, "I warn you Heda choose your next words well or my hoof could find its place somewhere truly inconvenient for the both of us!"

Heda snarled, briefly mangling his already twisted features. He took one hand from the Maintenance Girls' throat, flexing his talons as if to strike at the coquettish Sangheil, to mar her features out of some form of interior malevolence. Then he let the girl drop, and shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Sooner or later Tusa 'Falana you shall find your fickle love for these creatures will buy you no favors. You are just a girl with a voice, and soon none shall listen." He nodded to the assembled as if nothing had transpired, while hissing between his fangs.

Tusa watched him go with distaste. "Urgh, I can hardly remember a day in High Charity without his grotesque face leering around every pillar. Did you know actually sided with Truth during the changing of the guard? If he hadn't nearly been beheaded by a Jiralhanae I doubt he ever would have joined us. Well, anyway," she beamed, "glad to see you're alright."

The Maintenance Girl stared up at her, still squat on her rump. "Urgh." She wrinkled her nose. "I'll be smelling his breath for weeks." She gladly accepted Tusa's claw as she tugged her to her feet.

"I would have stopped him." O'Riley muttered, letting his hand slacken, "if he tried anything."

"And that would have been a very silly thing indeed." Said Tusa coldly. "But noble enough, I suppose." She was beginning to flush purple. Tusa 'Falana was very mindful of her appearance, and now she could finally get a good look at Penny she could see the AI practically glowed with own brand of universal beauty, and she was beginning to become uncomfortably self-conscious. She kept fighting down an urge to find out what cleavage was and see how she could go about getting some. "You should probably have her seen to." She added, as an afterthought, "and toned down maybe."

"Yeah, sorry about that." O'Riley spared his unconventional girlfriend a glance. "She really tries you know, I just don't think

Maintenance girl could forge a guess why.

Eva 'Embrax was leaning against the bar, twirling one of those strange Sangheili L-shaped blades around her finger in a way that could only be described as inflammatory.

"Welcome aboard Tusa," Eva huffed, "nice to see you ignore our policies on pets."

The second figure at the bar sniggered. He was a man, burly and rotund, smelling of flop-sweat and a walking cacophony of liquor scents. You could have dunked him in a barrel full of water, stuck an umbrella up his backside and made a concoction that would knock out even Gravemind.

The Maintenance girl pointed an accusing finger. "Youâ€¦ I know youâ€¦ whereâ€¦?"

"Halo's End, barman." The man grinned. "You soldiery types do seem to gravitate there on leave."

"I thought it was called 'Halo's Cessation.'"

"Yeah, but the Taxi companies complained that many of our clientele couldn't pronounce it right after samplin' our wares, leading to one or two embarrassing incidents involvin' a similarly named dancing house of the _burlesque_ variety."

"What are you doing here Eva?" Tusa sighed.

"We areâ€¦ running a training course." Eva let the knife drop, caught it between the fingers of her other hand and slid it into a sheath on her apron. "One more effort and my days of an apprentice cook shall come to an abrupt and welcome end. You, my dear 'Falana, are looking at the new culinary director of the _Veiled Shade._"

"May I?" Tusa took a step forwards.

"Nothing stopping you." Eva rocked backwards on her heels as the marginally lighter Sangheili caught her in an immediate embrace in a swirl of exquisite robes and curling scents.

"Oh love, that's _wonderful!_" Tusa enthused, "I always said you were too good for an 'on colony' job."

"You never said that."

"Wellâ€¦ I would have if I had been the type to say things like that."

"Actually you always said I was likely to be the first cook to drive Grea 'Morgamouss to an early grave."

"Well," Tusa broke away, "still plenty of time to start a record. Well done."

Eva laughed, "well, I suppose I'd be wrong to assume you were here to offer me your congratulations. Mr. Smythe," she grinned over her shoulder at the barman, "let's see the fruit of your efforts shall we?"

Tusa led the Maintenance girl over to a stool, essentially rendered in a size too large for any race. She smiled as two plates rattled over. "So, I assume your intent would be to sample a Sangheili drink, no?"

"Not really," the girl shrugged, "but I guess I'm always open to new ideas." She stared down at the thing on the plate. It looked like a bar cloth. An old one, one that hadn't been washed since the bar had opened. Like it had absorbed so much grime over the years it had expanded to an inch in thickness. On it tiny ecosystems had already begun to flourish.

"Is this a joke?"

"No," Eva vaulted over, "it's mine."

"Hey!" The barman snapped.

Eva gave a single shouldered shrug, "come on Smythe, this is good. I'll grade you today and tomorrow you can do the same for me."

"Provided you're not too hung over," Tusa snickered.

Eva beamed and took the plate from the girl, "this, my dear, is an Unggoy Nosh rag." She picked it up carefully as a long glass topped with frothy amber liquid rattled its way across to the maintenance girl. Eva balled the rag and wedged it between her mandibles, suckling it with every sign of enjoyment.

Tusa delicately picked at hers, casting a dour look in Eva's direction. "No need to disband from all common courtesies, Eva."

"Oh, hush."

The Maintenance Girl picked up her own glass, staring critically at the bubbles rising from the bottom. She took a sip. "Huhâ€¦ sweet."

[illegible]

In the experience of the Maintenance Girl, there were two basic brands of Sangheili cup. In the privacy of her own head, she labeled them: sippy and flutey.

Sippy cups had a shape that related well to humans. It was base Sangheili design, long and rising to a wide brim. It was designed to be large enough for a Sangheili to get the first third of their faces into the glass to better prevent the liquid running out the gaps in their mandibles. They went from the long drinking glasses down to things which were pretty much bowls. Flutey cups, conversely, rose to a slim point, and had been put together after their induction into the Covenant, at the behest of the Prophets. It was their 'polite' glass, for formal functions. The point was designed to go straight to the Sangheili's throat, and was inherently more practical than the sippy design. Tusa had admitted that it was also about as comfortably and inserting a fireside poker down your esophagus.

Amazing, though, she stared down at her hands, already two of the Sangheili honey drinks and she was still so clear headed.

Yes.

That wasâ€¦ yes.

How many fingers did she have again? One, twoâ€¦ twelve. Right. Yes.

Good.

"In myâ€¦" She belched delicately and continued, "in my experience I've always found solace in the fact that, yes, I probably was destined to cut up expensive fabrics for a living, but managed to break the bonds of my own upbringing to better implementâ€¦ ment them to science. So there, in your face _Ma!"_

Tusa sluggishly glanced at her with one eye, a small paper umbrella held between two of her mandibles. "Your dedication to your field is admirable, dear. I myself had a few complications with my choices in life."

"Really?"

"Indeed. My parents always held that I could choose to be whatever I wanted in life, provided I chose to be a linguist."

"Thought your father was into warrior ambitions," said the girl muzzily.

"For dear brother perhaps. But in a culture of almost a dozen races, each with a dozen dialects in a dozen different countries over â€¦ a dozen different planetsâ€¦ times a dozen. Wellâ€¦ I'm like â€¦ â€¦ something extremely good at governing things." She finished weakly."

"Aâ€¦ governor?" Eva hazarded.

"Yes!" Exclaimed Tusa triumphantly, "one of those. Right."

"A dozen races?" Asked the Maintenance girl.

"Ever met a Drinol?"

"No."

"Me neither, but it sounds exciting!"

Tusa giggled. She'd stopped at one Nosh rag, pointing out that the fungal rations were designed for Unggoy, a species who received little enough leisure time as it was, and had to make every second count.

Eva was swaying a little in her seat, decided to give the barman a companionable thumbs up, became confused which thumb to use and spent several seconds trying to untangle her fingers.

Tusa rolled her eyes, grinning, "ignore for a moment my unsightly

"Yeahâ€¦ shlup." The Maintenance girl set her elbow on the bar, missed and got it the second time. "Silly really, the way shome people carry on."

"What aboutâ€¦ Grae though," Tusa shot Eva a sidelong glance, "he's charming enoughâ€¦ in his way?"

"Grae 'Negrulee?" Eva snorted. "Old friend o' mn. Grew up t'gether in Ushia din't we? Heh, I've seen Grae and that lad has a much bigger obsession then Taso could 'ave. Won't tell me her name though."

"Is that so?" Tusa coughed, "well, no sense dwelling on such things. Right?"

"Rightâ€¦" The Maintenance girl grinned sluggishly. "You know Tusa one-"

"Which one?"

"_One,_" said the Maintenance girl vehemently, "almost thinks that you may have a littlilittle bit more insight onto this subject then you let on. I say," she looked up, "I don't think I've have had quite enough to drink yet."

"Agreed." Tusa ushered a new glass into her hand.

"What's this called?"

"A Blood Dead."

"Why a dinky little cup?"

"It's watered down." Tusa coughed, "you'll thank me."

"Why thank you Iâ€¦" The Maintenance girl's face turned a shade of crimson.

"Yes, that'll happen sometimes. Just try not move. Or breathe. Or look like your too interested in anything except not choking to death."

"Ehehehe." Eva clapped her hands, "Tusa 'Falana you witch. Oh, I say," her eyes turned shrewd, "wasn't that your father's pet name for you?"

"Don't push the point Eva or I'll make you eat your mandibles." Tusa warned, "it was actually not intended to be nice. He did not so much favor me as my brother."

"Oh poor dear, were you cast out in the rain?"

"Near enough. I had to sit for hours on a bed of cushions watching father knock the stuffing out of Taso while servants brought me fruit sherbets."

"Oh poor dear, that must have been _horrendous_."

"Don't dismiss me so glibly 'Embrax, it was the principle. He was using me to force Taso into thinking he was worthless. Forcing him to try and keep up with my father's mock-love. And don't get me started on all the reading mother forced down my throat, urgh, she may have been a bibliophile but I assure you I had miles more fun in the Jiralhanae clan tents. At least they had _un_structured

activities."

[illegible]

Grae 'Negulee, that was a another enigma.

How could a Sangheili Major have so much authority from so low a position? How could he continue to except the type of jobs most people wouldn't offer a Minor. Longsuffering Grae, diligently following in his Excellencies shadow, yet always dodging the attentions of the Ultras.

Grae 'Negrulee, beating off women with a stick so Taso wouldn't have to.

"It's not like it's a matter of etiquette really." Tusa stared moodily into her drink. It was something human. Bland, really, without even an interesting name. Bear or something. Alcohol tended to hit Tusa like a sledgehammer, that is to say, all at once. Often she prepared for it, Tusa 'Falana knew her own mind because if she didn't, who would? It's what she learntâ€¦ alright so maybe father hadn't been so bad to herâ€¦

The bar was still all but empty. Some marines had come in before, took one look at Eva's face and smartly turned about.

She did not appreciate company.

Eva had gone to sleep on the bartop, no doubt she'd raise comment when she realized what her cheek was stuck to.

Mr. Smythe simply stood and polished a glass. It wasn't his job to raise comment. He simply had to maintain a steady stream of intoxicants, keep a friendly ear on the side and maintain the type of confidentiality psychiatrists could only dream of. Unlike them, people tended to tell barmen the _truth._

"Concerned about something luv?" He had had a great deal of time to get over his species prejudices, and had been the first to suggest a 'Half-jaw was here' plaque for the newly christened Halo's End.

"Oh, just a choice that maybe went too far down a wrong track." Tusa wondered about when the intoxication would hit, and considered finding out where she could get her hands on a pillow to scream into in the morning. This was going to be a big one. "I'm wondering, exactly, how much credence Taso puts on our families prestige."

"My family used to grow watermelons." Supplemented the Maintenance girl irrelevantly. She'd hadâ€¦ X amount of drink and still felt so levelly headified. Now if only these damn monkeys would just go to sleep she could get on with some real work.

"If you must know," Tusa sniffed, "it was one of those formal functions some Sangheili with more money than brain-cells cobbled together to help 'raise human awareness,' doing his bit to help preserve an endangered species." She snorted. "You'll get a lot of that in the outer colonies. Anyway, they wanted a linguist to translate theâ€¦ oh what was it, 'demented jabbering of the apish troglodytes.' I wasâ€¦ less than enthralled the proceedings I might

She made it to her medicine cabinet before the first rolling wave of pain took her on the forehead and started drilling for oil. That was one thing you could say for being on maintenance, 'no communal showers.' Personal property was the bribe of ages past. She glanced over her shoulder, noticing Eva was sound asleep in the bath. Interesting.

She reached up to the cabinet, catching her own eye in the mirror.

When did I get a tattooâ€|?

Not a tattoo. There was writing under her eye, backwards in pen. She glanced down, yes, down her neck, all across her shoulders too. Along her arms, across her chest, blurring as it reached her knees. She compared the notes on her arm alongside her stomach, cross-referencing it with her cheek. She laughed and ran from the room.

"Eureka. Eureka! Ahahahah, ants, I got it, Eureka!"

Whoever said monkeys were only good for Shakespeare?

End
file.